UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE PREVIEW

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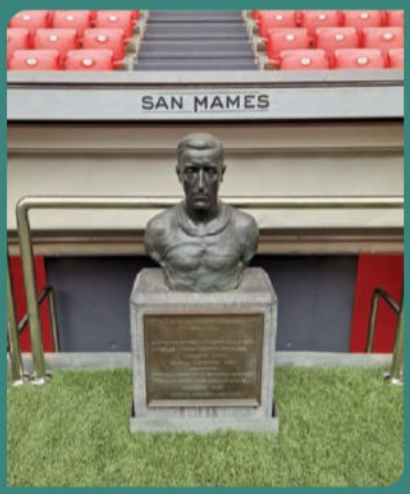

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Jonathan Wilson has cast his eye over the English champions Arsenal, Bundesliga champion Harry Kane discusses winning his second ESM Golden Shoe, and I recently spent a few days with perhaps the most dominant champions of any league in the world, Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim.

Elsewhere, we've taken a keen look at the upcoming internationals, with a whole raft of new managers in place.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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Credit: FC Bayern

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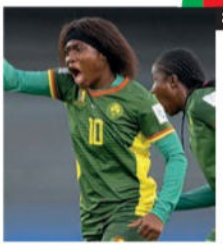

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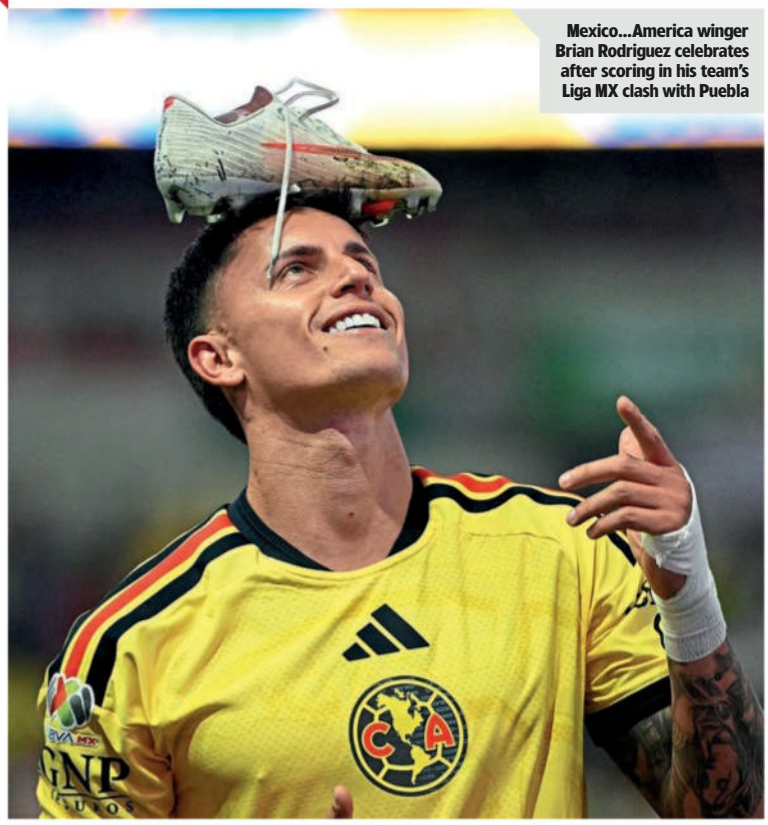

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Cole Palmer back to his best

Back to his best... Chelsea playmaker Cole Palmer

It truly brings a smile to the faces of Chelsea fans to see Cole Palmer having fun again – and to the faces of all who love watching a sumptuous talent express himself. It is a joy to see the 24-year-old playing so well again, ghosting past opponents, flicking the ball to Morgan Rogers here, sending Joao Pedro through there, creating and scoring. Palmer's every touch is progressive, moving the ball up the field with invention and often a touch of impudence. His first goal of the season involved placing the ball through the legs of the Fulham goalkeeper, Bernd Leno. He's now back in England contention after being dropped for the World Cup. Palmer's back.

His story is a lesson for all young players, their clubs and national FAs. The Professional Footballers' Association constantly warns about over-playing and Palmer seemed to slide into the red zone last season. His body stuttered, arguably weighed down by workload. On top of busy seasons, Palmer's three previous summers were spent helping England Under-21s to glory in the 2023 European Championship; helping England seniors to the final of Euro 2024; and helping Chelsea to victory in the 2025 FIFA Club World Cup played in sweltering conditions in the United States.

He ended up needing help. Fatigue and injuries, notably groin problems that restricted his movement, caught up with Palmer. He wasn't making those fluid, weaving runs. He wasn't contributing much out of possession.

When the new season dawned, the hope amongst Chelsea fans was for a new start for a player who signed for £42.5 million from Manchester City in 2023. He'd finished the season poorly, scoring once in his last 13 games. Palmer was even linked with a move back to his home city of Manchester, this time to play for United. That seemed slightly fanciful with Bruno Fernandes in place as playmaker. Even more surprising was the fee claimed in headlines of £120m. Palmer wasn't playing anywhere near that level.

He was so uninspired that England's head coach, Thomas Tuchel, omitted him from his World Cup 26. There wasn't much outcry. Palmer didn't deserve a place as a No.10; Jude Bellingham and Rogers were playing better. He didn't deserve a place on the right wing either, where Tuchel prefers pace such

as that belonging to Arsenal duo Bukayo Saka and Noni Madueke.

Frustration over Palmer's absence was belatedly voiced after England's failure to retain possession during Argentina's late onslaught in their semi-final in Atlanta. He was far away, resting after a crazy schedule that had clearly drained him.

Now, given a summer off by Tuchel, Palmer returns refreshed. Tuchel attended Chelsea's first home game of the season, the victory over Brighton, to watch Palmer amongst others. Missing the World Cup party, and seeing many of his friends like Rogers reaching the semi-finals, will surely have strengthened his desire to deliver this season. Tuchel's snub must have hurt.

Xabi Alonso's arrival as Chelsea's manager has helped. The managerial churn last season – Enzo Maresca followed by Liam Rosenior and two caretaker spells of Callum McFarlane – further complicated Palmer's stop-start season. Their tactical approach slightly inhibited Palmer.

Alonso set about freeing Palmer to run games. He knew exactly how. Alonso looked and learned during his long, illustrious playing career often alongside special creative talents. Part of Alonso's role was to bring the best out of them with his stellar range of passing – whether with Cristiano Ronaldo or Mesut Ozil for Real Madrid, Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery at Bayern Munich, or Andres Iniesta and Cesc Fabregas while on international duty with Spain.

Alonso now supplies the blank canvas for Palmer to express himself, encouraging him to move where he wants, spotting possibilities and making things happen. The new manager's 3-4-2-1 system suits Palmer. He operates as the right-sided of the two No.10s but interchanges with Rogers and Joao Pedro, the front man. Having two holding midfielders in Moises Caicedo and either Romeo Lavia or Reece James gives security behind Palmer. He contributes defensively, tracking back occasionally, but his best work out of possession is with his pressing. Defenders cannot hesitate even for a split-second. Palmer is so quick to pounce.

Liberated by Alonso and refreshed by a free summer, Palmer has enjoyed a strong start to the season. He just needs to maintain such form and keep working on his body to ensure the groin injuries don't return. Chelsea not being in Europe will allow him some more break time.

He's unlikely to start for England, not with Bellingham embedded as the No.10, but he deserves to be back in the squad. Most importantly, it's good to see Palmer back playing well again, back smiling again.

Liberated by Alonso and refreshed by a free summer, Palmer has enjoyed a strong start to the season

So long, Leo

Regular readers may remember I shared a cab with six Argentina fans racing from Philadelphia airport to the World Cup final in New Jersey. We made it with seconds to spare, have kept our "Operation Kick-off" WhatsApp group going since, and shared memories and pictures of Lionel Messi when he announced his international retirement at the end of August.

Along with the sea of sad-face emojis, one of my Philly fellow-passengers, Fernando, posted a picture of a distraught Messi after the final whistle. "We all knew this moment was the end of an era," Fernando wrote.

They were all in their early 30s and could hardly remember a time without Messi in the national team. For 21 years, he graced the side, bringing the touch of a true great with a touch of humility. They truly loved him like a brother and worshipped him like a deity.

I could see Messi's genius as a player. His compatriots' emotional outpouring helped me appreciate Messi even more as a leader, a national icon and adored human being. Life will be strange – and difficult – for Argentina without Messi.

Final game...Messi watches Spain lift the World Cup trophy

Argentine offenders off the hook

Suspended... Leandro Paredes has been given a ten-match ban by FIFA

In August, FIFA finally meted out punishments for Argentina's World Cup final miscreants: a ten-game ban for Leandro Paredes, seven for Nahuel Molina and one for Thiago Almada. Yet no sooner had those suspensions been announced, they were watered down. And the Argentina FA also says it plans to appeal the sanctions – to the Court of Arbitration for Sport if necessary.

It makes a mockery of the disciplinary process that the trio be allowed to serve suspensions in international friendlies. With a possible six friendlies before the World Cup runners-up are next in competitive action, it helps run down Paredes and Molina's bans, while Almada will be back within 90 minutes. Exile on easy street.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The rise of the Nations League

The UEFA tournament is central to the international game – both on and off the pitch

New campaign... the 2026-27 UEFA Nations League kicks off in September

Ironic, indeed, that UEFA should use the Nations League concept as one of its weapons in the war against Gianni Infantino's continued presence as FIFA president.

What began as a widely criticised initiative to fill friendly match slots has evolved into a cornerstone of European strategy on the pitch – and now off it. As the 2026-27 tournament kicks off, the concept represents both a political and commercial opportunity for the three most influential regional confederations.

The context was a fear at the end of the 1990s that national team football had been overtaken in popularity and relevance by the exploding power, focus and finance of the club game as exemplified by the Champions League.

Friendly matches were increasingly derided by club managers and frustrated national team coaches who found them next to useless as team-building exercises. They had become an out-dated nuisance to be avoided. For example, Ryan Giggs played 64 times for Wales between 1991 and 2007; only ten of them were friendlies.

UEFA's "middle class" proved the driving force for change. The likes of England, Germany, Italy and Spain were content to balance the dross with one-off showpieces against Brazil and Argentina. In 2014 Infantino was the UEFA general secretary who, under the presidency of Michel Platini, promoted today's Nations League structure of sectional groups and promotion and relegation.

The carrot was UEFA centralisation of TV and sponsorship, similar to the Champions League and European Championship model. This meant an initial decrease in revenue for the "Big Five" but significant financial guarantees for the vast majority. Also, the ranking-based "sorting hat" offered minnows real opportunities of winning matches against nations of their own competitive level.

Reservations were sounded by several small nations who considered the occasional visits of Spain, England, France, Germany, etc. as important promotional opportunities. However,

they were reassured that such glamour fixtures would remain a feature of the World Cup and European Championship qualifiers.

Infantino led the Nations League cheerleaders back then. He held a central role in devising the format, the commercial scheme and in selling the Nations League to UEFA's members. As he told a football business conference in 2014: "It's a logical development in terms of the international match calendar and there is far more interest for it than friendly games. Our purpose is to develop football and that means boosting interest throughout Europe. It creates a new stimulus and gives everyone a chance without adding to the number of games. By ranking the teams, you compete for something and play against teams that are more of your level. So it's win-win for everyone."

Familiar words. Change a few words here and there and one has a script to justify selling off FIFA's World Cup rights.

Maybe that is how Infantino sold his collapsed project to Joshua Kushner's Thrive Capital. A fascinating revelation in the fall-out was Kushner's admission of his shock at the football world's revulsion. Neither he nor his advisers had done their homework. Presumably, they relied on an assurance from Infantino that securing the FIFA family's worldwide approval would be an overnight tick-box exercise.

Returning to the Nations League creation, the one concern for Platini, Infantino & Co. was that supporters would be turned off by its complexity. As Lars-Christer Olsson, one of Infantino's UEFA predecessors once told me: "Any competition will stand or fall by how it works with fans." In the case of the Nations League, the short-time focus arising from the simplicity of groups of four held the interest.

The Nations League was eventually launched in the autumn of 2018, by which time Platini, instead of rising to the presidency of FIFA, had been banished from the game and the opportunistic Infantino had leapfrogged from the European game's engine room to world football supremo. If Infantino owned any self-awareness then, he must have barely believed his luck.

Aleksander Ceferin had succeeded Platini in September 2016. By then, the Nations League kick-off was already nailed in. Even Ceferin, from modest Slovenia, had his doubts. They were soon dispelled. The group stage of the first edition of the Nations League had not even concluded before he was singing its praises: "The Nations League is even more successful than we thought. We always had complaints from the big football countries – 'We play with small countries', 'We don't play amongst each other' – and we always had complaints from small ones – 'We never win'. Now all the numbers – media, fans – are fantastic."

Gianni Infantino was the UEFA general secretary who promoted today's Nations League structure

One of the most obvious attractions emerged, unexpectedly, from weaving the Nations League into the qualifying systems for not only the European Championship but also the World Cup.

Influential...Infantino helped devise the Nations League when he was UEFA general secretary

Sweden are the perfect example. The 2026 World Cup qualifiers saw Jon Dahl Tomasson's men finish rock-bottom of their European qualifying group with a mere two points. That cost Tomasson his job. Yet Sweden's "achievement" in having finished top of third-tier League C1 in the Nations League provided the lifeline of entry into the World Cup play-offs.

Victories over Ukraine and Poland took them to the finals under Graham Potter. They crashed 3-0 to France in the round of 32 but their mere presence at the finals must enliven every outsider's dreams heading into the new Nations League.

Portugal are defending the title, the only double winners after their inaugural event success in 2019; France won in 2021, Spain in 2023.

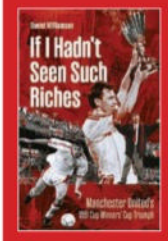
Portugal's title defence coincides with a structural overhaul of the international match calendar. This involves a merger of the dual autumn breaks of September and October into a single, extended 16-day window with most teams playing four competitive fixtures in close succession. Interesting to see how that works, for national teams and clubs, although UEFA expects to profit from a concentrated competitive block commanding global media attention.

Right now, CONCACAF is the only other confederation to stage a Nations League. CAF is planning to introduce its own version in Africa, controversially at the expense of a biennial AFCON. Likewise, the AFC will explore it too once January's Asian Cup is out of the way.

This has generated discussions about a joint UEFA/CONCACAF Nations League in 2028-29 with even Asia coming on board at a later date. Just another idea raised by the plotters in their attempt to ramp up the rebellious pressure on Infantino in the wake of his World Cup sell-off debacle.

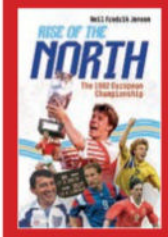
After all, who understands, better than Infantino, the financial and political potential of the Nations League?

BOOKS THIS MONTH



IF I HADN'T SEEN SUCH RICHES
By Daniel Williamson (Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

If I Hadn't Seen Such Riches chronicles Manchester United's dramatic 1990-91 European Cup Winners' Cup adventure, weaving in the culture, economics and vibrant music scene of the time. This is the definitive account of a pivotal campaign that laid the foundations for unprecedented success. Essential reading for all Red Devils supporters.



RISE OF THE NORTH The 1992 European Championship
By Neil Fredrik Jensen (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

Rise of the North is the extraordinary story of Denmark's shock 1992 European Championship triumph. Drafted in as late replacements for Yugoslavia, the Danes stunned the world by beating three former champions – France, Netherlands and Germany – in one of football's most improbable success stories. A must-read for anyone who loves an underdog tale.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Arsenal's summer rebuild

Has Mikel Arteta built a squad that can achieve Premier League and Champions League success?

The question for any side after they've achieved a goal for which they've been striving for years is how much the effort cost them. Can they pick themselves up and locate the reserves of mental and physical energy to go again? And then there's the squad. Does a club show gratitude to the players who brought success and trust essentially the same group, or does it have the ruthlessness to continue the ongoing process of revising and upgrading? And does it prune too much, damaging the morale and sense of togetherness that underlay the push for glory?

But for some teams, winning a trophy comes as a relief. They have nothing left to prove. They can relax. They can go back to trusting the process, rather than scrambling to get every result over the line. It happened to Chelsea in 2005-06, and it happened to Manchester United in 1993-94. The win achieved became the catalyst for further success. The early signs for Arsenal are that they might be pursuing a similar path.

After finishing second in three successive seasons, the consequences for Arsenal of not winning the league last season might have been dreadful. It's one thing for the outside world to mock you as bottlers, quite another if the players start to believe it themselves.

When they lost to Bournemouth and Manchester City in the space of a week, it looked as though they might have blown their chance. But they rallied, City stuttered and Arsenal claimed the title for the first time in 22 years.

Every signing is something of a gamble and there are no certainties, but the early feeling is that Arsenal have bought well – although they could probably have done with at least one more forward. Brazil's Bruno Guimaraes adds depth to their options in central midfield. Greece winger Christos Tzolis is a younger, perhaps more imaginative replacement for Leandro Trossard on the left. Ezri Konsa adds valuable depth to the back four, able to play in the centre or on the right, the value of which is immediately evident with the injuries to William Saliba and Jurrien Timber.

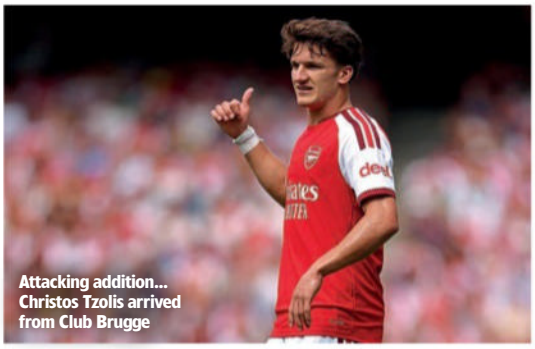
Midfield reinforcement... Bruno Guimaraes was Arsenal's biggest signing of the summer

> The early feeling is that Arsenal have bought well – although they could probably have done with at least one more forward

If there had been any diminution in Arsenal's hunger, it would surely have been apparent in the curtain-raising Community Shield. But they were sharp and energetic, snapping into challenges and playing with a verve and a zest way beyond City.

It's true that City's squad was a long way off how it appeared at the end of the transfer window, and that they were clearly way behind Arsenal in their development, but that's true of a lot of other potential challengers. Just as Arsenal have found a stability and a maturity, all their main rivals for the title are in transition.

And that is good news not only for Arsenal's hopes of winning the Premier League, but also for the Champions League.



Attacking addition... Christos Tzolis arrived from Club Brugge

There was a lot of criticism of their approach in last season's Champions League final against Paris Saint-Germain in which, having taken the lead early on, they sat deep, looked to frustrate Luis Enrique's side, conceded and ultimately lost on penalties – but that was probably the only way they could have played that game.

The Premier League is an exhausting league. There is no respite. The slightest slip will be punished. When Arsenal lost a 2-0 lead to draw against Wolves, there was much mockery, but Wolves were the 29th richest club in the world last season by revenue. Every game is a test. That is simply not true for PSG in Ligue 1. Only one PSG player, Vitinha, played more than 2,000 minutes of league football last season; nine of Arsenal's had. PSG's wage bill is almost double that of the side with the second-biggest, Marseille, and ten times that of, say, Le Havre. There was a time when the lack of challenge left PSG unable to cope when, in the latter stages of the Champions League, they came up against teams more used to scrapping. But now the demands on players are such that it has become an advantage.

They can leave players out of regular league games. They can keep them fresh for the Champions League. In the last two seasons, PSG have finished 11th and 15th in the league phase. For them, the autumn is a gentle warm-up. The real business comes in the spring – and by then Premier League teams tend to be exhausted. The performances of Declan Rice, Bukayo Saka, Martin Zubimendi and Saliba at the World Cup showed how exhausted they were.

But if Arsenal do dominate this Premier League season as it appears at this early stage that they might, especially given how stacked their squad now looks, they can be more discerning in who plays when. And that means that they might have a little more zip come the vital games in the latter stages of the Champions League. PSG's freshness advantage might be mitigated.

Djylian N'GUESSAN

(Brest)

The star of the France side that reached the final of the European Under-17 Championship last year, scoring four goals and named as the centre-forward in the Team of the Tournament.

By then, he'd already made his Ligue 1 debut for Saint-Etienne, becoming their youngest player since 1978, and last season scored his first goal for *Les Verts* in the French Cup.

In August, Liverpool agreed to pay £4.3m for the 18-year-old, who will join the Reds in January. In the meantime, he will spend the season on loan at Ligue 1 outfit Brest.

He will be joined at Anfield by another promising youngster, Colombia midfielder Samuel Martinez, who impressed in April's U17 Copa America and will move next year.

Chido OBI
(Willem II)
Manchester United worked hard to sign Obi in 2024 from Arsenal's academy, and made him their youngest Premier League starter a year later. Now, the striker can show what the fuss was about on loan at Eredivisie side Willem II.

Elijah UPSON
(Arsenal)
It's not quite another Sol Campbell situation, but Upson's decision to leave Spurs and move across North London was a boon for Arsenal. Son of former England defender Matthew, who also joined the Gunners as a teenager.

Jonatan Braut BRUNES
(Sparta Prague)
Erling Haaland's cousin enjoyed an impressive spell with Polish outfit Rakow Czestochowa, scoring 30 Ekstraklasa goals in two seasons to earn a move to Sparta Prague. He then scored on his debut for the Czech giants.

Youssoufa MOUKOKO
(Corum)
The former prodigy's search for a footballing home continues. After a frustrating season at Copenhagen, Moukoko, 21, was loaned to Turkish Super Lig new boys Corum. The striker was in Germany's 2022 World Cup squad.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Italian football is stuck in the past

Can an out-dated old-boys network turn things around for the Azzurri?

The shock and shame of Italy failing to qualify for three consecutive World Cup finals should've stirred one of football's great nations into positive action to help re-energise their game. Instead, it prompted only more chaos. Any soul-searching to be seen or heard was strictly superficial in the search for a new head coach to turn the tide.

It is astonishing for a country with such a strong football heritage, four stars on their shirt, and elite managers working in every corner of the world – from Carlo Ancelotti, Simone Inzaghi and Antonio Conte to Enzo Maresca, Roberto De Zerbi and Francesco Farioli.

The mood of football lovers was subdued during the World Cup. There were a myriad of angst-ridden articles in the sports papers about tiny nations being involved while Italy stayed home. This was just not right, just not cricket – except for the fact Italy's cricket team did reach the World Cup in their sport a few months earlier and performed with admirable skill as minnows in the manner of Cape Verde in soccer.

Italy's absence prompted crazy ideas such as a tennis-style wild-card entry to the World Cup for "big" football nations who failed to qualify. It was a humiliating suggestion.

Worst of all, though, was the chaotic and lengthy process – almost four tortuous months – of finding a replacement for Gennaro Gattuso, who quit as manager immediately after the failure to qualify in March.

Gabriele Gravina, aged 72, stepped down as head of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) at the same time as Gattuso, and his successor had to be chosen first. This was an election battle between two old politicians of sport: Giovanni Malago, 67, president of the Italian National Olympic Committee, and Giancarlo Abete, 75, previously head of the FIGC from 2007-2014.

Everyone in Italian football had a say: 34% of the votes came from amateur football, the players' union 20%, Serie A 18%, Serie B 6%, Serie C 12%, and the managers' association 10%. This is not a system designed to provide dynamic fresh leadership, but to reward those who best play the power game.

Malago won the vote and chose Italy legend Paolo Maldini as new technical director, tasking him with finding the next manager. Maldini aimed high initially – but Ancelotti preferred to stay with Brazil, while Pep Guardiola insisted on needing a break from management. Maldini then changed tack completely and settled on Andrea Pirlo, his old team-mate at Milan, but with a meagre track record as a coach.

Scepticism now ran like the wind.

Other candidates in the frame had included two former managers of Italy in Conte and Roberto Mancini. At that moment, Mancini just happened to be playing in the over-60s section of a five-a-side competition called the Coppa Canottieri featuring rival exclusive sports clubs based along the River Tiber.

One of the players in Mancini's side, the Circolo Aniene, was none other than Malago, the new federation boss. These clubs are the powerbase of sport in Rome – the rival presidential candidate Abete is also a member at Aniene.

Photos of Mancini and Malago together, in their playing kit, were then plastered all over the Italian media. A few days later, Pirlo was ruled out as the new Italy boss by Malago because of a personal sponsorship deal with a Russian betting company. Maldini resigned in protest, clearing the way for Malago to appoint his preferred chap, Mancini.

Scepticism had transformed into widespread cynicism amid intense grumbling about an old-boys network. And who could blame the fans? There was nothing to inspire optimism for the future, nothing to suppose that an urgently required wind of change would now blow through to reinvigorate *calcio*.

The veteran powerbrokers of Italian football remain stuck in the past, fondly remembering ancient glories, idly returning to former managers, decadently believing in miracles.

Old-boys network... Roberto Mancini is unveiled alongside the FIGC's technical director Claudio Ranieri and president Giovanni Malago

> This is not a system designed to provide dynamic fresh leadership, but to reward those who best play the power game

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Sailing along the Rhône River, you'll discover the historic city of Lyon, famous for its gastronomy and UNESCO-listed Old Town, as well as charming Provençal towns such as Avignon, Arles, and Viviers. Along the way, enjoy stunning scenery, fascinating local heritage, and opportunities to experience the flavours, art, and traditions that make this region so unique.

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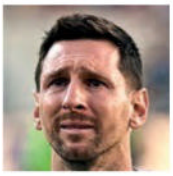
VIKING



"You kept asking me to play in one last World Cup, and just days before it started, you took a turn for the worse…I wanted to win it so I could bring the trophy back to you…I couldn't"

Lionel Messi's letter to his late father Jorge Messi

OBITUARIES

Spurs icon…Terry Dyson in action for Tottenham Hotspur

Terry DYSON
(1934-2026)
Busy left-winger whose tireless running and sharp instincts etched his name permanently into Tottenham Hotspur history. Dyson was a key member of the double-winning side of 1960-61, with his cross setting up Bobby Smith's opening goal in the FA Cup final before heading in the second himself. Two years later Dyson scored two decisive goals in the 5-1 defeat of Atletico Madrid in the 1963 European Cup Winners' Cup final as Spurs became the first British club to win a European trophy. Dyson, signed by the North London club in 1955, played 209 games (55 goals) in all competitions and remains the only Spurs player to score a hat-trick against North London rivals Arsenal. Later played for Fulham and Colchester United before moving into non-league management and coaching.

Juan MUHLETHALER
(1954-2026)
Forward who helped Wanderers win promotion to the top division in 1972 and then, three years later, become the first Uruguayan club, apart from Penarol or Nacional, to qualify for the Copa Libertadores. Moved on to Penarol and then Ecuador's Tecnico Universitario on the recommendation of the great Alberto Spencer. Returned home with Rampla Juniors and also played in Colombia before settling in Ambato, Ecuador, where he was a radio commentator. Played six times for Uruguay between 1975 and 1983, scoring his lone goal against Peru in the 1978 World Cup qualifiers.

Arturas FOMENKA
(1977-2026)
Centre-forward who scored seven goals in 23 international games for Lithuania between 1996 and 2003. Three times a Lithuanian champion, three times a cup winner and once the league's top goalscorer while with Ekranas and FK Kareda Siauliai (later Kaunas) in the late 1990s. Subsequently played in Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan.

Ivan GUDELJ
(1960-2026)
Outstanding midfielder with Hajduk Split whose career was cut short aged just 26 after he collapsed during a match against Red Star Belgrade and was diagnosed with hepatitis B. Gudelj had been appointed Yugoslavia captain at 21 and scored three goals in 33 internationals including the finals of the 1982 World Cup and 1984 European Championship. Totalled 93 goals in 362 games in all competitions for Hajduk with whom he won the Yugoslav Cup in 1984. His coaching appointments included Austria's Vorwarts Steyr and Hajduk, and he guided Croatia to fourth place in the European Under-17 Championship in 2005.

One-club legend… Portsmouth keeper Alan Knight in 1980

Euro '84…Yugoslavia's Ivan Gudelj goes up for a header with France icon Michel Platini

Mike BAILEY
(1942-2026)
Right-half who was a powerful captain of Wolverhampton Wanderers under the management of Bill McGarry in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Bailey started at Charlton Athletic before moving to Molineux in 1966. He made 436 appearances in total, scoring 25 goals, for Wolves, leading them to the UEFA Cup final in 1972 and winning the League Cup two years later. In 1976-77, his final campaign at Wolves, he led them to promotion back to the top flight. Bailey had a brief stint in the North American Soccer League (NASL) with Minnesota Kicks before returning to England as player-manager of Hereford United. Later took charge of Charlton, Brighton & Hove Albion, Greek club OFI Crete and non-league side Leatherhead.

Giuseppe MARCHIORO
(1936-2026)
Italian coach who had spells in charge of Verbania, Alessandria, Como, Cesena, Milan, Avellino, Ancona, Prata, Barletta and Foggia in the 1970s and 1980s before leading Reggiana all the way from Serie C1 to Serie A in 1993.

Alan KNIGHT
(1961-2026)
The epitome of a club legend, goalkeeper Knight debuted for Portsmouth as a 16-year-old in 1978 and went on to play a total of 801 games for Pompey, placing him second in the club's all-time appearance list. He played in all four English divisions across four decades, and won two caps for England's Under-21s in 1983.

JOSE MARIA Junior
(1943-2026)
One of the many Portugal internationals discovered in the African colonies, in his case Angola. Left Petro Luanda for Vitoria Setubal in 1962. Scored a then-club record 114 goals in 386 appearances in 14 years, winning the Portuguese Cup twice and playing four times for Portugal between 1967 and 1970. Moved to Toronto Blizzard in 1977 before settling in the United States.

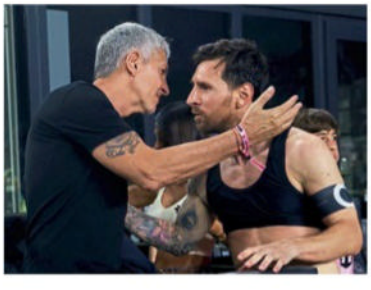
Dumitru MARCU
(1950-2026)
Forward handed his Steaua Bucharest

"Well, I would have liked to have had the money, but I was very attached to my home; I didn't want to leave my parents and friends"

The late Eberhard Vogel on turning down an offer from Santos and the chance to be Pele's partner in attack in the 1970s

debut by top coach Stefan Kovacs in 1971 then scored 63 goals in 203 league games between 1972 and 1980 for Universitatea Craiova with whom he won both the league and cup twice. Nicknamed *Motoreta* (The Motorbike). Marcu played 16 times for Romania between 1972 and 1979, scoring three goals, two of them in the Tricolours' record victory, a 9–0 win over Finland in a 1974 World Cup qualifier.

Jorge MESSI
(1958–2026)
Father and business representative of Lionel Messi over his son's entire career from Newell's Old Boys to Barcelona at the age of 13 and on to PSG and Inter Miami. Died three weeks after the 2026 World Cup with his son having played through the finals knowing of his father's worsening health.



Messi senior...Leo greets his father Jorge at an Inter Miami game last year

Robert MOUYNET
(1930–2026)
The last surviving member of the France team that finished third at the 1958 World Cup in Sweden – which included the likes of Just Fontaine and Raymond Kopa – although Mouynet injured a knee on the eve of the finals and did not play a single game. The defender never won a full senior cap but played over 400 league matches from 1949 to 1963 with Toulouse, Cannes and Lyon.

Nicolae UNGUREANU
(1956–2026)
Romania's left-back in all three of their matches at the 1984 European Championship among his 56 international appearances (one goal) between 1981 and 1989. Won two domestic league titles and three cups with Universitatea Craiova then two more titles and two cups with Steaua Bucharest. Member of the army club's team beaten 4-0 by Milan in the 1989 European Cup final.

Top keeper...Jimmy Rimmer in action for Arsenal in 1974

Jimmy RIMMER
(1948–2026)
Goalkeeper who remarkably ended his 21-year career with two European Cup winners' medals despite playing only nine minutes. Rimmer was Manchester United's reserve keeper behind Alex Stepney in 1968 then, in 1982, was substituted because of a neck injury after only nine minutes of Aston Villa's 1-0 win over Bayern Munich. Rimmer, from Southport, spent nine years at Old Trafford and three years with Arsenal before moving to Villa Park. Made 229 league appearances for Villa and played once for England in a friendly against Italy in 1976.

Bobby ROSS
(1942–2026)
Scottish forward who represented Brentford with distinction between 1966 and 1973, captaining the Bees and scoring 56 goals in 323 games. Started out at Hearts and also played for Shrewsbury Town, Cambridge United and Hayes, who he later went on to manage.

Phan Thanh HUNG
(1960–2026)
Star striker for Quang Nam Da Nang, who scored once in seven games for Vietnam in 1993. Also enjoyed a long coaching career, including seven games in charge of the national team in 2012.

Tragedy...Castro at West Brom in 2021

Quevin CASTRO
(2001–2026)
The former West Brom midfielder, who also represented the likes of Notts County, York City and Cambridge City, collapsed while playing for Portuguese lower-league side Real Sport Clube.

Eberhard VOGEL
(1943–2026)
One of the icons in the short football history of East Germany, and hailed by Pele in 1968 as "the best left-winger in the world." Vogel won Olympic bronze in 1964 and 1972 with the GDR along with 74 caps and 25 goals (later downgraded by FIFA to 69 and 24). Vogel held the record of 440 games in the domestic Oberliga with 188 goals, second only to Joachim Streich (229). East German Footballer of the Year in 1969.

He was noted not only for his goals and intelligence but his speed, though he joked he was not the fastest in his own home since wife Angela Hohme had been national 100m champion. Won the GDR league with Karl-Marx-Stadt in 1967 and three cups after joining Carl Zeiss Jena with whom he was runner-up (to Dinamo Tbilisi) in the 1981 European Cup Winners' Cup. Vogel was a member of the GDR squad at the 1974 World Cup, but injury saw him miss the historic victory over West Germany.

Jean-Paul ROSTAGNI
(1948–2026)
Reliable left-back who played for Monaco, Bordeaux, PSG, Paris FC and Nice. Won 25 France caps between 1969 and 1973.

Yukio SHIMOMURA
(1932–2026)
Goalkeeper Shimomura was a survivor of the atomic bomb attack on his home city of Hiroshima. He played once for Japan in 1955 v Myanmar (then Burma) and was a non-playing reserve at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne. Played his club football for Tokyo Industries then coached the club to five league titles and three Emperor's Cups. Appointed national team manager in 1979, but resigned after the failure to qualify for the 1980 Olympic Games.

Borge THORUP
(1943–2026)
Defender who played once for Denmark because, in the amateur days, he spent most of his career abroad, mostly in the UK. Turned out for Greenock Morton (twice), Crystal Palace and Clydebank. Started and ended his club career in Copenhagen with Bronshoj BK.

Words by Keir Radnedge, Mark Gleeson & Jamie Evans

"We are very grateful to Chelsea for opening their doors to us, and we will do everything we can to make our matches there exciting and memorable for both Ukrainian and English fans"

Shakhtar Donetsk CEO Sergei Palkin on playing their 2026-27 Champions League games at Chelsea's Stamford Bridge

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month…

207

Argentina caps won by Lionel Messi, an *Albiceleste* record, after the iconic No.10 announced his international retirement. He also scored 125 goals for his country, another national team record.

3

Argentines that Inter Miami have appointed as head coach since signing Messi, with former Valencia winger Kily Gonzalez hired in August to follow on from Javier Mascherano and Gerardo Martino.

47

Number of league matches Saudi Arabian side Al Hilal had gone undefeated before losing 2-0 to Neom in September.

2

Penalties scored by goalkeeper Ronald Koeman Jr. – son of the former legendary Netherlands defender – in Telstar's 2-2 draw with Cambuur in the Eredivisie.

3

League games that Fabio Grosso lasted in charge of Fiorentina before being sacked as their head coach following three straight defeats.

11

MLS goal contributions registered by Philadelphia Union starlet Cavan Sullivan, the first 16-year-old to reach the tally, breaking a record previously held by Freddy Adu.

MLS wonderkid… Cavan Sullivan

Quick-fire goal…Lassine Sinayoko scores against Marseille in a 3-2 win

23

Seconds it took for hat-trick hero Lassine Sinayoko to score for Paris FC against Marseille – one of the fastest goals in Ligue 1 history.

46%

Share of West Ham United now owned by Daniel Kretinsky after the Czech billionaire increased his stake in the Championship club to become its largest shareholder.

2

Norwegian teams in this year's Champions League, the first time the Scandinavian nation has had two of its representatives make it through the qualifying rounds since the 1999-2000 campaign.

$4m

Estimated value of London City Lionesses' new Nike shirt sponsor, the biggest in women's football history according to their owner Michele Kang.

$9.89 billion

The total value of international transfer spending when the summer transfer window closed in early September, according to FIFA figures.

15

Consecutive Bundesliga seasons in which Bayern Munich have won their opening match, after they thrashed Stuttgart 5-1 on the first day of the 2026-27 campaign.

1,043

Days that former Netherlands Under-21 defender Perr Schuurs was absent through injury before returning for NAC Breda – and scoring in his comeback match.

£1.5m

Fee paid by Djurgarden to National League side Boreham Wood to sign forward Abdul Abdulmalik, breaking a league record previously held by Jamie Vardy's £1m switch from Fleetwood Town to Leicester City.

2027

Year that Dick Advocaat will remain in charge of Curacao, after the veteran Dutch coach penned a new deal to take him through to next summer's CONCACAF Gold Cup.

1

African managers to have taken charge of a UEFA Champions League match after Yaya Toure led Slovan Bratislava against PSG.

Slovan boss …Yaya Toure

FREE AGENTS

At the end of the transfer window, the below players were without a club…

Player	(released by)
David ALABA	(Real Madrid)
Ismael BENNACER	(Milan)
Karim BENZEMA	(Al Hilal)
Yves BISSOUMA	(Tottenham Hotspur)
Dani CARVAJAL	(Real Madrid)
Raphael GUERREIRO	(Bayern Munich)
Mauro ICARDI	(Galatasaray)
Riyad MAHREZ	(Al Ahli)
Tyrell MALACIA	(Manchester United)
Anthony MARTIAL	(Monterrey)
Tanguy NDOMBELE	(Nice)
Paul POGBA	(Monaco)
Renato SANCHES	(Paris Saint-Germain)
Jadon SANCHO	(Manchester United)
Raheem STERLING	(Feyenoord)
Wilfried ZAHA	(Galatasaray)
Oleksandr ZINCHENKO	(Ajax)

Free agent… Alaba says goodbye to Real Madrid supporters

"I don't need a contract. I have a very successful career. I have taken care of my money. I can give this present to myself. To put that shirt on…for free because I wanted to help my club, my team, my city"

Ander Herrera speaking to *BBC Sport* after re-signing for boyhood club Real Zaragoza in the Spanish third tier

BIGGEST LATE SUMMER MOVES

£124.7m	**Enzo FERNANDEZ**	*(Chelsea to Manchester City)*
£107.5m	**Bradley BARCOLA**	*(PSG to Liverpool)*
£107.5m	**Yan DIOMANDE**	*(RB Leipzig to Real Madrid)*
£81.7m	**Ayyoub BOUADDI**	*(Lille to Manchester City)*
£75.4m	**SAVIO**	*(Manchester City to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£75.25m	**Bruno GUIMARAES**	*(Newcastle United to Arsenal)*
£65.3m	**Carlos BALEBA**	*(Brighton to Manchester United)*
£60.2m	**Gabriel MARTINELLI**	*(Arsenal to Al Hilal)*
£60.2m	**Iliman NDIAYE**	*(Everton to Manchester City)*
£52.5m	**Tijjani REIJNDERS**	*(Manchester City to Al Qadsiah)*
£51.6m	**Matias FERNANDEZ-PARDO**	*(Lille to Newcastle United)*
£51.6m	**RODRI**	*(Manchester City to Barcelona)*
£51.3m	**Ezri KONSA**	*(Aston Villa to Arsenal)*
£50.2m	**Ollie WATKINS**	*(Aston Villa to Al Hilal)*
£48.2m	**Nico GONZALEZ**	*(Manchester City to Newcastle United)*
£47.7m	**Nicolas JACKSON**	*(Chelsea to Aston Villa)*
£47.3m	**Ibrahim MBAYE**	*(PSG to Aston Villa)*
£45.2m	**Liam DELAP**	*(Chelsea to Nottingham Forest)*
£43m	**Diego MOREIRA**	*(Strasbourg to Milan)*
£43m	**Maghnes AKLIOUCHE**	*(Monaco to PSG)*
£41.7m	**Ferran TORRES**	*(Barcelona to PSG)*
£41.3m	**Mamadou SANGARE**	*(Lens to Brentford)*
£40.2m	**James TRAFFORD**	*(Manchester City to Leeds United)*
£38.7m	**Mika GODTS**	*(Ajax to PSG)*
£35.4m	**Randal KOLO MUANI**	*(PSG to Juventus)*
£35.1m	**El Hadji Malick DIOUF**	*(West Ham United to Brentford)*
£34.4m	**Ousmane DIOMANDE**	*(Sporting to Nottingham Forest)*
£34.4m	**Gonzalo GARCIA**	*(Real Madrid to Fulham)*
£34.4m	**Valentin BARCO**	*(Strasbourg to Chelsea)*
£32.7m	**Rafael LEAO**	*(Milan to Galatasaray)*
£32.2m	**ALLAN**	*(Palmeiras to Manchester City)*
£30.9m	**Amar DEDIC**	*(Benfica to Newcastle United)*
£28.4m	**Lucca BRUGHMANS**	*(Genk to Liverpool)*

City debut… Enzo Fernandez

Barca's star signing…Rodri

United new boy …Carlos Baleba

£28.4m	**Cristian ROMERO**	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Atletico Madrid)*
£27.5m	**Kerim ALAJBEGOVIC**	*(Bayer Leverkusen to Juventus)*
£26.3m	**Lukas HORNICEK**	*(Braga to Newcastle United)*
£26.2m	**Julio ENCISO**	*(Strasbourg to Ipswich Town)*
£26.1m	**Shea CHARLES**	*(Southampton to Fulham)*
£25.8m	**Malick FOFANA**	*(Lyon to Sunderland)*
£25.8m	**Guela DOUE**	*(Strasbourg to Bayer Leverkusen)*
£25.8m	**Curtis JONES**	*(Liverpool to Internazionale)*
£25.8m	**Zion SUZUKI**	*(Parma to Aston Villa)*
£25.8m	**Djed SPENCE**	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Internazionale)*
£25.8m	**Trevoh CHALOBAH**	*(Chelsea to Como)*
£25.8m	**Konstantinos KARETSAS**	*(Genk to Borussia Dortmund)*
£25.1m	**Taylor HARWOOD-BELLIS**	*(Southampton to Aston Villa)*
£24.1m	**Moussa DIABY**	*(Al Ittihad to Bayer Leverkusen)*
£24.1m	**Dayann METHALIE**	*(Toulouse to Sunderland)*
£23.2m	**Caleb YIRENKYI**	*(Nordsjaelland to Coventry City)*
£22.4m	**Giannis KONSTANTELIAS**	*(PAOK to Borussia Dortmund)*
£22.4m	**Miguel GUTIERREZ**	*(Napoli to Bayer Leverkusen)*
£22.2m	**Brennan JOHNSON**	*(Crystal Palace to Everton)*
£22.2m	**Dwight McNEIL**	*(Everton to Crystal Palace)*
£22.1m	**Arne ENGELS**	*(Celtic to West Ham United)*
£22.1m	**Daniel MUNOZ**	*(Crystal Palace to Nottingham Forest)*
£22.1m	**Carl RUSHWORTH**	*(Brighton to Coventry City)*
£21.5m	**Aleksey BATRAKOV**	*(Lokomotiv Moscow to Galatasaray)*
£21.5m	**Rodrigo MORA**	*(Porto to Roma)*
£21.5m	**Matteo RUGGERI**	*(Atletico Madrid to Aston Villa)*
£21.5m	**Dzenan PEJCINOVIC**	*(Wolfsburg to Stuttgart)*
£21.5m	**Antonio SILVA**	*(Benfica to Bournemouth)*
£21m	**Sidiki CHERIF**	*(Fenerbahce to Coventry City)*
£21m	**Anan KHALAILI**	*(Union Saint-Gilloise to Crystal Palace)*
£20m	**Nobel MENDY**	*(Rayo Vallecano to Hull City)*
£20m	**Konstantinos TZOLAKIS**	*(Olympiacos to Hull City)*

Source: Transfermarkt.co.uk

LOAN SIGNINGS

Nick WOLTEMADE	*(Newcastle United to Juventus)*
Omar MARMOUSH	*(Manchester City to Tottenham Hotspur)*
Franco MASTANTUONO	*(Real Madrid to Fiorentina)*
Ethan NWANERI	*(Arsenal to Borussia Dortmund)*
Moise KEAN	*(Fiorentina to Como)*
Omari HUTCHINSON	*(Nottingham Forest to Milan)*
Neil EL AYNAOUI	*(Roma to RB Leipzig)*
Pape Matar SARR	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Juventus)*
Jonathan DAVID	*(Juventus to Atletico Madrid)*
Honest AHANOR	*(Atalanta to Crystal Palace)*
Jonathan ROWE	*(Bologna to Atalanta)*
Hugo LARSSON	*(Eintracht Frankfurt to Fulham)*
Dilane BAKWA	*(Nottingham Forest to Lille)*
Christopher NKUNKU	*(Milan to RB Leipzig)*
Charlie CRESSWELL	*(Toulouse to Rennes)*
Pedro GONCALVES	*(Sporting to Fiorentina)*
Jean-Matteo BAHOYA	*(Eintracht Frankfurt to Leeds United)*

Another Englishman at Inter…Curtis Jones

Juventus loan… Nick Woltemade

Youssouf FOFANA	*(Milan to Sevilla)*
Davide FRATTESI	*(Internazionale to Lazio)*
Simon ADINGRA	*(Sunderland to Ajax)*
Mamadou SARR	*(Chelsea to Real Sociedad)*
Jean-Clair TODIBO	*(West Ham United to Lens)*
Robert SANCHEZ	*(Chelsea to Como)*
Kevin DANSO	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Sunderland)*
Jack GREALISH	*(Manchester City to Everton)*
Ronald ARAUJO	*(Barcelona to Liverpool)*
Mohamed AMOURA	*(Wolfsburg to Nice)*
Harvey ELLIOTT	*(Liverpool to Valencia)*
Arthur VERMEEREN	*(RB Leipzig to Royal Antwerp)*
Mikey MOORE	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Cologne)*
Elye WAHI	*(Eintracht Frankfurt to Nice)*
Guglielmo VICARIO	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Juventus)*
Santiago GIMENEZ	*(Milan to Porto)*

30 eye-catching transfers

Jamie Evans **picks out some of the summer's most intriguing deals**

Warm welcome ...Salah touches down in Turkey

MOHAMED SALAH

(Liverpool to Trabzonspor)

1 There had been speculation about who Mohamed Salah would sign for ever since January, when he announced that he would be leaving Liverpool when his contract expired in the summer. A big final payday in Saudi Arabia seemed the likeliest answer, or perhaps MLS, where Sporting Kansas City reportedly led the race – or even, one last tilt at the Champions League in one of Europe's other big leagues.

It was a surprise, then, to see the Egypt megastar rock up in Turkey, and with a club from outside the traditional Istanbul giants. In August, Salah signed a two-year deal worth a reported £14.5 million per season.

Champions in 2022, Trabzonspor are based on Turkey's Black Sea coast. Last season they finished third to qualify for the Europa League, only to lose to Hungarian side Ferencvaros in the qualifying play-offs, sending them into the Conference League and prompting the resignation of manager Fatih Tekke just weeks after Salah's unveiling.

Unfazed by a chaotic first few weeks at the club, the Egyptian scored four goals in his first four league games.

Helping him settle in is one of his ex-Liverpool team-mates, Brazilian Fabinho, who joined Trabzonspor after three years with Saudi outfit Al Ittihad.

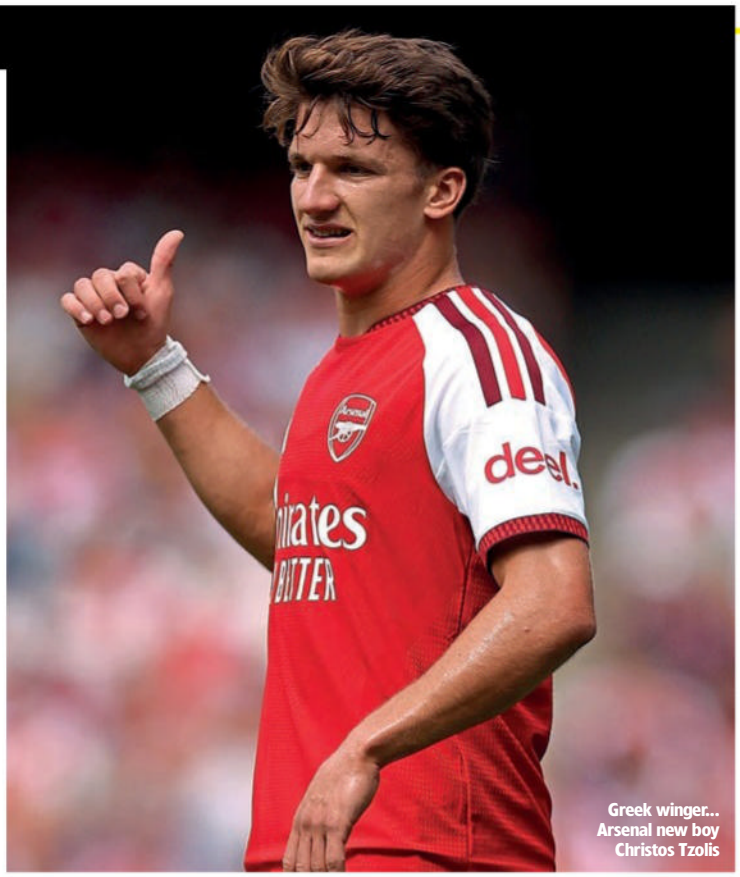
CHRISTOS TZOLIS

(Club Brugge to Arsenal)

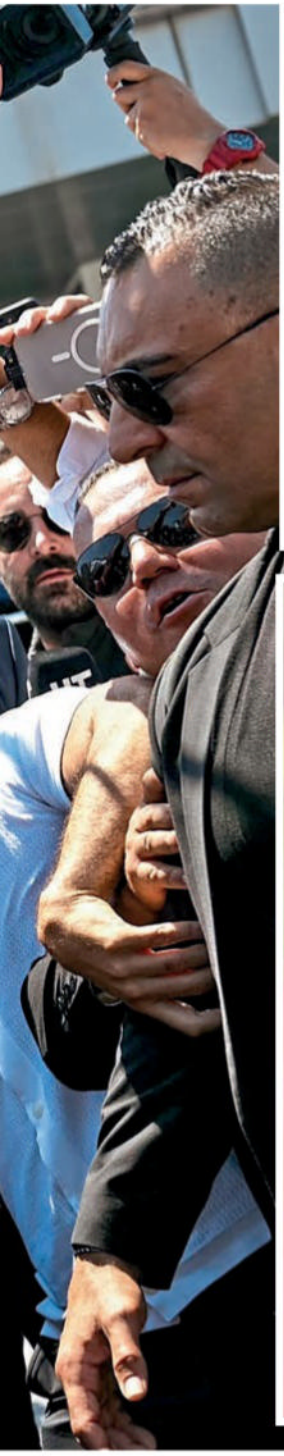
2 Arsenal's new signing was in keeping with a theme of this transfer window: the rise of Greece as the home of exciting young talent.

At £34m, the 24-year-old was the most expensive and oldest of the six Greece internationals who moved for eight-figure fees during the summer. Elsewhere, Borussia Dortmund brought in midfielders Konstantinos Karetsas, 18, and Giannis Konstantelias, 23, from Genk and PAOK respectively, Roma signed central defender Konstantinos Koulierakis, 22, from Wolfsburg, and Hull City struck deals with Olympiacos for both midfielder Christos Mouzakitis, 19, and goalkeeper Konstantinos Tzolakis, 23.

Tzolis, though, has the biggest burden on his shoulders. Arsenal's decision to sell Gabriel Martinelli, Leandro Trossard and Gabriel Jesus, as well as loaning out Ethan Nwaneri, means he is now an almost-certain starter for the Premier League champions. The early signs have been encouraging for the ex-Norwich City man, but he has plenty more to do.



Greek winger... Arsenal new boy Christos Tzolis



Statement signing...Portugal striker Goncalo Ramos

GONCALO RAMOS

(Paris Saint-Germain to Milan)

3 Moving from Paris to Milan for a fee of €74m made Ramos one of this summer's most expensive transfers not involving a Premier League club – only Yan Diomande's move from RB Leipzig to Real Madrid cost more.

But more than that, the Portugal striker was also the first signing of a new era at Milan. Over the summer, the club replaced their entire senior management team after failing to qualify for the Champions League. Ramos' compatriot Ruben Amorim was installed as the new head coach, and his new boss has been full of praise for his early performances.

Ramos is also the most common answer to the question: "who should start up front for Portugal instead of Cristiano Ronaldo?" and, with a new manager installed for the *Selecao*, the former Benfica No.9 has a big opportunity to demonstrate his credentials to Jorge Jesus.

This is a big season for a player who, at 25, has already had more than €130m spent on him in cumulative transfer fees across his career to date.

MAMADOU SANGARE

(Lens to Brentford)

4 Sangare is a perfect example of one of the curiosities of the Premier League transfer market. It's not that Brentford are the only club to have spotted him last season – the Malian was a key cog in a Lens side that won the French Cup and came second to Paris Saint-Germain in Ligue 1 – but rather that they were the ones willing to take the risk on signing a player with no experience of English football.

It is, of course, very early days, but the 24-year-old looked completely at ease on his Brentford debut against Tottenham Hotspur after joining for a club record fee of £39m – far more so than his more expensive opponents on the day, Sandro Tonali (£92.5m) and Mateus Fernandes (£85m).

After a summer in which Chelsea, Manchester City and Manchester United all spent huge sums on midfielders with Premier League experience, it begs the question: should the bigger clubs cast their nets a little wider and take more risks on the likes of Sangare?

Brentford's record signing... Mamadou Sangare

Chelsea bound... Honest Ahanor

HONEST AHANOR

(Atalanta to Crystal Palace)

5 While the 18-year-old Italy defender is undoubtedly a talented young player, this is a move that says more about clubs' innovative ability to find loopholes and workarounds in the transfer market.

At the start of 2026, *World Soccer* named Ahanor as one of our 50 young players to watch this year, and he ended the 2025-26 season with 22 Serie A appearances for Atalanta. That caught the attention of Chelsea, who struck a £40m deal to secure his services but wanted him to spend this season out on loan in the Premier League. They turned to Crystal Palace, but as the Eagles had already signed Frenchman Axel Disasi for the campaign – Premier League sides can only loan one player to another club in the same division – an alternative solution was reached.

Ahanor, then, signed for Palace on loan from Atalanta but will join Chelsea next summer, leading to the bizarre situation of the player being announced by two English clubs on the same day.

THE REST

ALLAN
(Palmeiras to Manchester City)
Palmeiras' knack for developing young talent continues, with Allan following Endrick (Real Madrid), Estevao (Chelsea) and Vitor Reis (Manchester City) to Europe.

THIAGO ALMADA
(Atletico Madrid to River Plate)
Almada becomes the fifth 2022 World Cup winner in *Los Millonarios'* squad, along with Angel Correa, Nicolas Otamendi, Marcos Acuna and Gonzalo Montiel.

PIERRE-EMERICK AUBAMEYANG
(Marseille to Deportivo)
Depor's faith in the veteran striker on their return to La Liga has been repaid with four goals in his first four league games.

LUCCA BRUGHMANS
(Genk to Liverpool)
Liverpool's succession planning for Alisson continued with the £30m signing of the Belgian teen, who will stay at Genk this season.

JONATHAN DAVID
(Juventus to Atletico Madrid)
David's impressive goal record in Ligue 1 failed to translate to Serie A. Can he fare any better on loan at Diego Simeone's Atletico?

PROMISE DAVID
(Union Saint-Gilloise to Brighton)
Canada's other David was prolific in two years with Union, including the title-winning 2024-25 season.

NATHAN DE CAT
(Anderlecht to Hoffenheim)
The German side saw off stiff competition to land the talented 18-year-old, who was a regular in the Belgian top flight last season.

Back in Buenos Aires ...Thiago Almada

MOUSSA DIABY
(Al Ittihad to Bayer Leverkusen)
"Some stories deserve another chapter," declared Leverkusen after re-signing a player that left the club for Aston Villa in 2023 before moving to Saudi Arabia.

BREEL EMBOLO
(Rennes to Atlanta United)
After four years in France and six in Germany, the Switzerland front-man, joint-seventh in his country's all-time goalscoring charts, waved goodbye to European club football to join the Major League Soccer outfit, and scored on his debut.

FRANCULINO
(Midtjylland to Trabzonspor)
The 22-year-old Guinea-Bissau forward could hardly stop scoring last season, and notched on his Turkish Super Lig debut too. A Benfica academy graduate.

ORLANDO GILL
(San Lorenzo to Lille)
Paraguay's giant World Cup keeper opted for first-team football at Lille over reported interest from the likes of Bayern Munich, Juventus and Manchester United.

Paraguay's World Cup goalkeeper... Orlando Gill

MIKA GODTS
(Ajax to Paris Saint-Germain)
PSG sold one exciting young winger (Ibrahim Mbaye to Aston Villa) but gained another in Godts, who scored 17 Eredivisie goals last season and has been compared to Eden Hazard.

MARC GUIU
(Chelsea to RB Leipzig)
Last season was a frustrating one for Spain Under-21 striker Guiu, loaned to Sunderland in August only to be recalled three weeks later and then play just 82 Premier League minutes. This move offers him a fresh start.

CHRIST INAO OULAI
(Trabzonspor to Fiorentina)
Only two years ago the young midfielder was still playing in the Ivory Coast. Now he's got AFCON and World Cup experience, plus a €28m move to Serie A.

NESTORY IRANKUNDA
(Watford to Sporting)
Impressed for Australia at the World Cup. At his best when running into open space, he may well do his best work for Sporting in Europe.

JAKUB KAMINSKI
(Cologne to Benfica)
Another exciting young Poland winger playing in Portugal, after Oskar Pietuszewski's fine debut season at Porto last year.

FRANCK KESSIE
(Al Ahli to Atalanta)
With two AFC Champions League winners' medals in his collection, Kessie returns to his former club from Saudi Arabia with a sense of mission accomplished.

JUSTIN LERMA
(Independiente del Valle to Borussia Dortmund)
The latest golden boy from Ecuador's talent factory at a club known for developing young stars makes this move a perfect match on paper. Lerma, 18, is a hugely promising attacking midfielder.

FRANCO MASTANTUONO
(Real Madrid to Fiorentina)
In signing a young Argentine playmaker on loan from Real Madrid, Fiorentina will hope to have unearthed another Nico Paz, the attacking midfielder who has been so impressive for Como.

RODRIGO MORA
(Porto to Roma)
Despite his obvious talent, with ten league goals in 2024-25, the teenager's face didn't seem to fit at Porto last season, but he remains an exciting prospect.

ALVARO MORATA
(Como to Leganes)
Just over two years ago Morata was Spain's Euro 2024-winning captain, now he is on loan in the Spanish second tier – though he insists he still hasn't given up on playing for *La Roja*.

TROY PARROTT
(AZ to Real Betis)
The prolific Republic of Ireland striker made a thrilling start to life in Spain, scoring a late winner against Real Madrid in La Liga and then notching on his Champions League debut too.

NATHAN PATTERSON
(Everton to Torino)
Serie A's perceived obsession with Scotland continues, with the ex-Rangers right-back the eighth Scotland international in the Italian top flight.

AYASE UEDA
(Feyenoord to Lille)
At €15m, the Japan striker could be one of the bargains of the summer, having scored 25 Eredivisie goals last season.

ROBBIE URE
(Sirius to Sevilla)
An unconventional career path took the striker from Rangers to Belgium, Sweden and now Spain. Will be eyeing a first Scotland cap.

eye witness

Phil Kitromilides reports

SPAIN

The signing of the Spanish summer

How Barcelona saw off *Clasico* rivals Real Madrid to land Rodri

"Barcelona are paying €30 million to sign Rodri and €40m for Real Madrid not to sign him."

The assessment of the biggest transfer of the summer in Spain from former Real Madrid manager Jorge Valdano is one which not only makes a good deal of sense but also frames this deal within the toxically symbiotic relationship of the country's two biggest clubs.

Florentino Perez famously once said: "If Barcelona didn't exist, we would have to invent them." *Los Blancos* and *Blaugrana*, fierce enemies on the pitch but mutually dependent on each other – not only to provide a competitive and revenue-churning rivalry that is *El Clasico* but also on a more intrinsic level, each club defined by the simple fact that they are not the other.

The differing sporting ideologies of the two may have had an effect on Rodri's decision to move to Catalonia this summer instead of the capital of Spain. Jose Mourinho revealed to Spanish TV show *El Chiringuito* in August that he had spoken to Rodri on a couple of occasions about a possible move, but the midfielder had doubts.

"And those doubts, made me have my own doubts," reflected the Portuguese coach. "I think Real Madrid is so big, that we can't have players who need to think twice before joining".

But what could those doubts have been from Spain's World Cup-winning captain?

Might they have been to do with the fact that the footballing philosophy professed by Mourinho could be anathema to Rodri's vision of the game? Certainly his years at Manchester City under the most famous Catalan coach of all time could lead us to conclude that he would feel far more comfortable from a playing perspective slotting into a Hansi Flick XI rather than one selected by the current coach at the Bernabeu.

On a more personal level, there could also have been doubts from Rodri on how he was treated by Real Madrid in 2024.

Having helped Spain win the European Championship and led City to another Premier League title, Rodri became only the second Spanish player to win the Ballon d'Or. It remains a source of pride among people in the country to have had one of their fellow countrymen recognised with the highest individual honour in football. This is a country that has produced an enormous number of exceptionally gifted midfielders, but only one Ballon d'Or winner – Luis Suarez, way back in 1960 (Alfredo Di Stefano was a Spanish international when he collected the award in the 1950s, but he was born in Argentina).

Where Xavi, Andres Iniesta, Sergio Busquets, Xabi Alonso, Cesc Fabregas, David Silva and the rest had all failed, the then-Manchester City player triumphed. While there is a general sentimentality in the country over the 2010 golden generation, winning the Ballon d'Or elevated Rodri to the status of national treasure.

The monumental achievement, however, was somewhat overshadowed by Real Madrid's reaction to the news, with the club enforcing a total boycott of the event in protest at Vinicius Junior not being handed the award. Carlo Ancelotti, Madrid manager at the time, was set to pick up the Coach of the Year prize, but neither the genial Italian nor anyone else from the club travelled to the ceremony.

It was a bad look for *Los Blancos*, coming across as petulant and petty to the watching world, but behind the scenes there was also disappointment and incredulity in Rodri's inner circle. Members of his family were said to be extremely upset at the treatment of the Madrid-born midfielder.

Had that episode been forgotten by this summer? That is doubtful.

What is beyond doubt is that Real Madrid have badly needed a player of Rodri's profile for the last two years. The departures of Toni Kroos then Luka Modric have left a gap in midfield that needs to be replaced by a player with the intelligence, technical ability and positional awareness to control the tempo of matches. A reluctance to go for Martin Zubimendi last summer has been followed by Rodri's very public snub, and while Madrid's PR machine has been in overdrive to try to limit the damage to the club's sizeable ego, the real damage could be on the pitch.

And that is music to Barcelona's ears. At least it should be.

The signing of Rodri for the Catalans was seen as an "*oportunidad de mercado*", a market opportunity too good to pass on, despite midfield being an area of the pitch where strengthening was not a priority. Barca started their La Liga campaign without a recognised centre-forward and without reinforcing at centre-back, both positions where business was deemed vital following the departures this summer of Ferran Torres, Robert Lewandowski and Ronald Araujo. Instead, they got Rodri – a 30-year-old midfielder with a recent history of serious injury issues, who was heading into the final year of his contract at Manchester City anyway. The deadline-day signing of Gabriel Jesus, one of Rodri's former City team-mates, from Arsenal has not completely satisfied questions of an imbalanced squad.

Yet such is the esteem in which the MVP of the most recent World Cup is held that none of that really matters. The bottom line being, if you can sign Rodri, you sign Rodri. If you can sign Rodri and it stops your biggest rival from strengthening in the one position they need to improve above all else, even better.

There is perhaps one issue that needs to be addressed: can Rodri and Pedri shine together? The immediate answer would be that two players of such high calibre must surely be able to find a way to complement each other. Recent showings for Spain, however, provide a small trickle of doubt, with *La Roja's* best performances at both Euro 2024 and the recent World Cup coming with Fabian Ruiz alongside Rodri rather than Pedri.

Flick has masterminded a superb relocation job with Pedri, positioning the 23-year-old as a deep-lying playmaker

Barcelona new boy...Rodri waves to the supporters after moving to Camp Nou

rather than as a No.10 where he began his career, and a double-pivot of the two is an appealing prospect on paper.

Rodri's first appearance for Barca came off the bench against Athletic Club and, in the 20 minutes they shared the pitch, he did not receive a single pass from Pedri. That changed considerably in the last half an hour of his second game, against Rayo Vallecano, where Rodri received more passes from the 23-year-old than anyone else.

It is a work in progress but however Flick decides to use the duo, the German coach certainly has plenty of credit in the bank. Since his appointment, Barca have won five of the six possible domestic trophies.

Where they have fallen short is in the Champions League and the arrival of Rodri could be the missing piece of the puzzle.

Both of Barcelona's European eliminations under Flick have come as a result of perceived naivety and tactical vulnerability. In 2025 they were moments away from making the final and should have been able to see out the game against Internazionale but conceded late on and were eliminated. Then in last season's quarter-final second leg against Atletico Madrid, they overturned a 2-0 first-leg deficit inside 25 minutes only to then concede a few minutes later.

It is difficult to envisage either of those scenarios playing out as they did had Rodri been on the pitch.

Flick has made little secret of the fact that winning the Champions League is his main objective, declaring it "a dream" to achieve it with Barcelona. The Catalans' barren spell in Europe stretches back to 2015 and 11 years without winning the continent's premier club competition is too long for this sporting giant and its demanding fanbase. And as we know, Spain's two biggest clubs judge themselves not simply on what they have achieved

If you can sign Rodri, you sign Rodri. If it stops your biggest rival from strengthening, even better

but what the other has done also – the Catalans' Champions League drought has coincided with Real Madrid adding five more European Cups to their honours board.

Choosing Barcelona over Real Madrid has enamoured Rodri to *Blaugrana* fans on a profoundly emotional level. If signing the midfielder helps Barca return to the summit of European football – and ensures another trophyless season for *Los Blancos* – that would elevate his standing to truly legendary status.

eye witness

Jamie Evans reports

MALAYSIA

The team that can't stop winning

How Johor Darul Ta'zim became the most dominant club side in world football

"Defeat happens, I can accept defeat," Sir Alex Ferguson once said. "My purpose after that was to make sure it never happened again."

The ability to bounce back from losses was a defining characteristic of Ferguson's Manchester United sides, yet even they never put together a run quite like Malaysian champions Johor Darul Ta'zim (JDT).

On April 24, 2021, JDT lost 1-0 at home to Terengganu in the Malaysian Super League. A week later, they drew 1-1 with Kuala Lumpur City. That, it turned out, was match number one of a world record-breaking unbeaten run in the league.

On the opening day of this season, they defeated Kuching City 3-0 in Malaysia's charity shield, which doubles up as the first league match of the new campaign. That took their unbeaten tally to 109 league games, surpassing the record set by Ivorian side ASEC Mimosas in 1994 and making headlines around the world.

At the club's Sultan Ibrahim Stadium and their state-of-the-art training ground, there is plenty of pride at an achievement that has put Johor Bahru on the map. The city is located at the bottom of Malaysia, some 200 miles south of Kuala Lumpur and a short bridge-crossing from Singapore.

But it has also raised questions. Is this level of dominance healthy? Have JDT outgrown Malaysian football? Can they achieve their ultimate aim of winning the Asian Champions League if they are never tested at home?

In other words, is it possible for a team to win too much?

The first question, though, is how have they become so dominant? The short answer is that JDT have a wealthy and influential owner, and that Malaysia is just like most other leagues around the world, where the teams with the deepest pockets come out on top. But that only tells part of the story.

His Royal Highness Tunku Ismail Idris, the crown prince of Johor and son of the current king of Malaysia, took charge of JDT in 2013 and over the years has transformed the team's fortunes.

It is a long-term project, one that is as much about securing the prince's legacy off the pitch as it is about results on the pitch.

The end product is a team that has come to totally dominate Malaysian football, winning 12 league titles in a row and setting a world record that will not be beaten any time soon.

"The most important factor is culture. Not one player, not one coach, not one season," Tunku Ismail tells *World Soccer*. "We built an environment where winning is the expectation, where standards are non-negotiable, and where every part of the club is designed to support performance."

That environment is evident at a training facility that is as good as almost any in Europe, a 40,000-seater stadium where they hosted Chelsea in pre-season, and an academy that is providing the next generation of Malaysian players. When the Under-20 national side took part in qualifiers for the Asian Cup recently, 15 of the 23-man squad were from JDT.

Record breakers... players of Johor Darul Ta'zim celebrate after setting a world record unbeaten streak

Indeed, while most of their first-team players have been recruited from abroad, the star player is an academy graduate, 24-year-old Arif Aiman.

"Arif is extremely important because he represents the reason we invested in the academy in the first place," adds Tunku Ismail.

It's all a long way from the club that the prince found when he took charge in 2013. It was while attending a hockey match in the city that he was approached by fans who asked him to save Johor FC, as they were known at the time.

One of his key early appointments was that of Alistair Edwards, a former Australia striker who played for Johor in the early 1990s.

"When I was here [as a player], everything was more of the traditional, old-school Malaysian way," he says. "The stadium was kind of old and dilapidated. We didn't have a training facility. We'd train in an open field, and you'd have to bring a towel and hose yourself down afterwards.

"His Royal Highness was eight years old, and he used to come to watch

Star player...Arif Aiman

Home of JDT... inside the Sultan Ibrahim Stadium

training. When he started with the club, it would have been exactly the same as it was when I was playing.

"He just started from scratch. Now, it's world-class facilities."

Edwards arrived as technical director to help oversee the development of the club, including building the academy, before moving up to chief executive officer. Last year, he became the chief operating officer, with former Liverpool and Spain forward Luis Garcia arriving as the new CEO.

After retiring as a player in 2016, Garcia took his time deciding on his next career move. He tried coaching, punditry, was an ambassador for Liverpool, and gained a sporting director licence, but was drawn to the business side of football and completed an MBA with UEFA.

The Champions League winner was invited to Johor to meet with Tunku Ismail and was instantly impressed.

"After ten minutes, I decided to join the club," he says.

In a summer of change, Garcia was joined by former Watford manager Xisco Munoz, adding to the heavy Spanish presence at the club, with former Valencia coach Javier Jorda already installed as academy manager.

"I try to choose a very good project" says Xisco. "I was in the Premier League and the facilities are the same."

It was a management team put in place ahead of a historic season in which JDT would not only extend their domestic dominance but also become a continental force.

> "We built an environment where winning is the expectation, where standards are non-negotiable, and where every part of the club is designed to support performance"
>
> **Tunku Ismail Idris, owner of JDT**

In April, they became the first Malaysian team in history to play in the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League Elite, where they were beaten 2-1 by the eventual winners Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia.

Afterwards, there were regrets – JDT took an early lead, Ahli were reduced to ten men in the first half, and Aiman was absent through injury – but the experience was invaluable.

"There are massive, massive gaps in budget between us and them," says Garcia, "but we wanted to be in Saudi, wanted to feel what it is, to be there, the atmosphere, what the teams are like. It was a great learning experience."

It is a bone of contention that Saudi clubs have such a clear advantage in the Champions League. As well as having the biggest budgets on the continent, they also play all the key matches on home soil; the AFC have agreed to stage the quarter-finals onwards in Saudi Arabia until 2029.

If the competition reverted to a two-legged format for the knockouts, and JDT were able to host games in Malaysian conditions, in front of their raucous ultras the Boys of Straits, they believe they could go even further in the competition.

For a club that has achieved more than a decade of domestic dominance, this is the next frontier for JDT.

"If you asked me five years ago, 'what's next?' I'd say I just want to compete in the Champions League," says Edwards, "but fast forward to now, playing in Saudi Arabia, against the cream of the crop...actually, we're there. We're mixing it with the big boys. And not only that, we keep on getting better and better."

For Xisco, the challenge is how to balance the demands of the different competitions. On top of the league, there are two domestic cups and two continental competitions.

Playing in five different tournaments doesn't just rack up minutes on the pitch but considerable travel time too, with long flights all over Asia.

"The travel is different than in Europe," says Xisco. "In England, you have one hour 30 by plane to get home, here maybe you need ten or 12 hours."

CEO and owner...Luis Garcia and Tunku Ismail Idris

State of the art...the stunning training ground of Johor Darul Ta'zim

Boys of Straits... JDT's ultras watch their team in Asian Champions League Elite action

To keep up with the demands, the club operates with a huge squad, but that brings challenges too.

"We play a lot of competitions, we have a lot of games, so we have 40 players," Xisco continues. "It's difficult sometimes to manage all of these players."

The nature of the games in the various competitions can also be vastly different.

"Some situations never happen in our league," Xisco explains. "We are 100% dominant and we are playing against one low block."

Going from that to being underdogs in the Champions League against sides from Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, having to adapt to not having the ball, is a challenge. The coach and his staff use training to create match situations that they simply don't encounter in the league.

It is a problem that will be familiar to some European clubs. Slovan Bratislava, for example, arrived in the league phase of this year's UEFA Champions League as one of the underdogs, yet domestically they are peerless, winning eight Slovakian titles in a row.

> "Maybe it's an idea in the future to get an ASEAN Super League – because we're so far above our competition in the local league"
>
> **JDT chief operating officer, Alistair Edwards**

The situation has left some asking whether the Malaysian Super League is now simply holding JDT back.

"100%. It really is," admits Edwards. "For us to win the Asian Champions League, we need to play top-quality games week in, week out. And that's the only thing that's holding us back."

As Garcia also points out, JDT don't just need a stronger league so that they can face sterner tests on the weekends. The Malaysian league is currently ranked 11th in Asia, sixth in the east, which grants one automatic spot in the league phase of the Champions League Elite. If the league were to drop down the rankings, the Malaysian champions would have to go through a play-off in order to qualify – or perhaps miss out altogether.

Providing a useful bridge between the Malaysian league and the Asian Champions League is the ASEAN Club Championship. First played in the early 2000s, it was revived for the 2024-25

AFC Champions League Elite...JDT players celebrate taking the lead against Al Ahli

season, with 14 clubs from across the region taking part.

Last season, JDT reached the semi-final, where they were beaten over two legs by the eventual champions Buriram United of Thailand.

With six group-stage matches followed by a knockout round, it is a significant addition to the schedule, but a welcome one. While none of the other top flights in the region are quite as one-sided as Malaysia's, JDT are not the only side craving more competitive action: Buriram have won five Thai league titles in a row, Persib have won three in Indonesia, and Lion City Sailors didn't lose a game in last season's Singaporean top flight until after they had sealed the title, their second in a row.

This season's edition of the competition has been expanded, with a quarter-final stage added, hinting at further integration across the region.

"There's a lot of talk about doing an Asian Super League," says Edwards. "Maybe it's an idea in the future to get an ASEAN Super League – the two best teams from Singapore, two best teams in Thailand, two best teams from Indonesia – and then we'll have a competition. Because, to be honest, we're so far above our competition in the local league it's hindering our development."

There is a burgeoning rivalry with Buriram – when the two sides met in mid-September in the opening match of this season's AFC Champions League, it was their seventh clash in two years – and it's a rivalry that fans have come to relish.

"I think it [an ASEAN Super League] is a great idea," Awit, a fan of JDT, tells *WS*. "We really need that exposure, because right now we're setting a benchmark. The other teams are really far from us."

"When the other team are not catching up, it makes you stagnant," adds Jeremy Cherng, another fan. "We hope that all the other clubs can stand up and give us more of a challenge, then we can strive to get better and better."

Garcia, though, is not convinced.

"A Super League is something that is appealing for JDT, of course. But is it good for Malaysian football? I'm not sure," he says.

"But it's something that has to be on the table.

"You don't want a dominance so big that the rest of the competitors are not even willing to make an effort to compete. And that's something that the prince has been working on. He's been trying to think of ways to push the other teams or the other owners."

"Stronger competition makes everyone better," says Tunku Ismail. "I want JDT to be challenged because that is how you continue to improve. But the answer is not for JDT to become weaker. The answer is for the rest of Malaysian football to become stronger."

After JDT began the new season as strongly as ever, there is little sign of that challenge emerging. The only way their domination of Malaysian football will end, it seems, is if they leave it behind.

JDT head coach ...Xisco instructs from the touchline

eyewitness

Liam Miller reports

PORTUGAL

Boavista on the brink

Inside the movement aiming to rescue the former Portuguese champions from bankruptcy

In the 92-year history of Portugal's Primeira Liga, only five clubs have been crowned champions. The vast majority of league titles have been won by *O Tres Grandes*, the Big Three, of Porto, Benfica and Sporting, but in 2000-01, their dominance was briefly interrupted by Boavista. Now, 25 years on, the upstarts from a neighbourhood in Porto find themselves facing an existential crisis.

There has been a schism at the heart of Boavista ever since the club was founded. In 1903, workers at the nearby Graham's factory (which would go on to become one of the world's largest exporters of port) formed, after FC Porto and the Oporto Lawn and Tennis Club, the city's third football team.

They established a pitch just a stone's throw from the Graham's factory, on a patch of grassy land known as the Bessa field. They were founding members of the Porto Football Association, and inaugural champions of the local league in 1914, before signing up to the nationwide competition 21 years later.

After decades of yo-yoing between the first, second and occasionally third divisions, the club's first real taste of success game in the late 1970s when they won three Portuguese Cups in five years, alongside a series of top-four league finishes.

But the 20-year period straddling the turn of the century represents the high watermark for Boavista. Under the stewardship of Joao Loureiro, who at 34 was the league's youngest president when he succeeded his father in 1997, they went from strength to strength.

After narrowly missing out in 1998-99, the club won their first and only league title in 2001. No team has managed to wrest the championship away from the Big Three since.

Sustained European competition followed. In 2003, they reached the semi-finals of the UEFA Cup, knocked out by Celtic, denying them a historic final against city rivals Porto.

Along the way, plenty of famous names wore the club's chessboard shirt. Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink's breakout season, the one that attracted the attention of Leeds United, saw him score 20 goals in 29 league games for Boavista in 1996-97. At the other end, goalkeeping sensation and long-time Portugal No.1 Ricardo played over 200 times for the club before moving on to Sporting in 2003. Bruno Fernandes spent almost a decade in the Boavista academy before beginning his professional career in Italy in 2012.

But at the heart of their growing reputation and stature, a fissure was building, a volcanic eruption of irreconcilable debts and liabilities. On July 16 of this year, a Portuguese insolvency court ordered the club to close its doors by the end of the month.

"My love for Boavista was passed down to me by my late father," Gustavo Santos, co-founder of the Movimento Salvar o Boavista (Save Boavista Movement), tells *World Soccer*. "This is about the survival of a club that represents generations of people, and a fundamental part of the identity of the city of Porto."

The movement was ▸

On the brink... Boavista's Estadio do Bessa was rebuilt for Euro 2004

founded in the summer of 2025, but recent months have seen activity increase significantly. Gustavo is energised. "Our priority is not power, positions or personal interest. It is Boavista."

★

The club's current situation is a complex web of insolvency proceedings, financial malpractice, quirks of Portuguese sports law, and a maddening lack of coherent safeguards against the mismanagement of community institutions.

"Personally, I've been mourning the club for quite a while now," Francisco Placido, another lifelong Boavista supporter, admits to *World Soccer*. "It's been on the horizon for so long that, sadly, it was expected."

In the eyes of most supporters, the cause of the spiral began back in 2001. "The rebuild of the Bessa for Euro 2004 relied on promised support that was never put in writing," says Francisco. "Boavista didn't retain the revenues from its Champions League campaigns, and began accumulating debts to other suppliers in order to keep the stadium project going."

The renovation of the Estadio do Bessa cost north of €45 million. It hosted just three group-stage matches at the 2004 European Championship.

After that UEFA Cup semi-final defeat to Celtic, Boavista's on-pitch fortunes began to slide. A series of below-average league finishes ended the flow of European football and its revenue. By the time May 2008 came around, the balance sheet was battered and bruised. It was not ready to absorb what was about to happen.

"In 2008, Boavista was administratively relegated," Gustavo explains. "It pushed the club into the abyss."

Swallowed up by *Apito Dourado* (Golden Whistle), a scandal that rocked Portuguese football with accusations – and in many cases, convictions – of corrupting or attempting to corrupt referees, the league fined Boavista €180,000 and relegated them to the second division. After a long legal battle, the club was finally reinstated to the top flight in 2014 but the rot had long set in; mere survival was now a season-to-season imperative.

In times of desperation, sometimes a knight in shining armour is all you can hope for. In October 2020, under a FIFA-imposed transfer embargo and with outstanding debts dating back to

Glory years...Boavista players celebrate a goal in the 2001-02 Champions League

Dropping down... Boavista exited the top flight in 2024-25

the stadium renovation, Boavista fans might have thought that Gerard Lopez was that knight. Unfortunately the association with Lopez, who has also presided over Royal Excel Mouscron in Belgium and Girondins de Bordeaux in France – two other clubs to have fallen on very hard times in recent memory – only seemed to accentuate the malaise afflicting the club.

★

Boavista's story is not unique in this regard. Lisbon's third team, CF Belenenses, the only other club to be champions of Portugal – back in 1945-46 – underwent an almost identical ordeal over a decade ago. The similarities point to a wider structural problem in Portuguese football.

"In the past, clubs were associations, owned by club members," Vicente, a member of Furia Azul, one of the club's ultras groups, tells *World Soccer*. "But in the last couple of years, most clubs have sold their private companies to investors, and in many cases the members were manipulated into these sales, without full transparency."

After relegation from the top flight at the end of the 2024-25 season, neither the second, third or fourth divisions would allow Boavista to register a team, consigning them once more to Porto's district league.

"We reached this situation as a result of years of financial mismanagement," says Gustavo, "which we hope will one day be recognised as criminal."

In July 2025, authorities raided the Boavista offices, seizing documents and hard drives as part of a criminal indictment accusing six unnamed executives and directors of the club of tax evasion and money-laundering. It is important to state that Lopez is not a subject of that investigation.

By September, a Portuguese court formally began the liquidation process of the club. Their debts had reached an astonishing €150m. The assets were auctioned off, including the stadium. In Portugal, football clubs are often multi-sport community institutions. Almost 1,500 athletes across indoor and outdoor sports operate under the banner of Boavista and rely on its facilities. The impact of its ceasing to exist goes far beyond football.

> "This is about the survival of a club that represents generations of people, and a fundamental part of the identity of the city of Porto"
>
> **Gustavo Santos, co-founder of the Save Boavista Movement**

For some fans, enough was enough. Last summer, the club's largest ultras group, Panteras Negras (Black Panthers), broke off and established their own club under the same name, entering the Porto district league.

But others weren't prepared to walk away. Just two days after the court ordered Boavista to close its doors earlier this summer, the Movimento Salvar o Boavista launched a crowdfunding campaign. "We [the movement] contacted the board immediately and made it clear that we were not going to stand by and watch the club die," Gustavo says fiercely. "It was incredibly intense days, but the response from supporters and society was extraordinary. In just three days, we raised €75,000. Within a week, we'd raised over €91,000."

The movement had, extraordinarily, allowed the club to reopen one month later. "We showed that Boavista still has a community willing to fight for it," Gustavo says, beaming with pride.

The facts for the Movimento remain frighteningly stark: deposit €48,500 into the club's account each month, in accordance with the insolvency plan, or risk indefinite closure. Boavista's board, a stripped-back selection of officials, must present a clear plan for the club's survival and financial sustainability to the court. Clear those two hurdles and, at least in the short-term, Boavista will exist.

But with what Gustavo calls a "deeply disappointing" lack of support from Porto City Council, and a widespread distrust in senior leadership – no matter how much court supervision they're given – the optimism is, naturally, severely tempered.

Part of the very idea of a football club is the romance attached to its founding; a group of workers getting together on a patch of grassy wasteland. Boavista's battle for survival is both an example of that idea enduring, but also an example of how quickly a chain of bad decisions can send it down a dark path, veering away from that founding idea, and into something procedural, administrative and decidedly not romantic. The Movimento Salvar o Boavista retains that idealism and, wherever that endures, the idea of Boavista will always have a home.

Influential owner...former club president Joao Loureiro (R) oversaw Boavista's "high watermark era", the 20-year period that straddled the turn of the century

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The Favourites

ARSENAL

Gunners aiming to go one step further

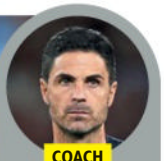
On the crest of a wave after claiming their first Premier League title in 22 years, the Gunners will be full of confidence as they take the next, vital empire-building step, the conquest of a first European trophy since beating Parma in the final of the 1993-94 European Cup Winners' Cup. As far as the Champions League is concerned, Arsenal clearly have been moving in the right direction in recent times: quarter-finalists in 2023-24, through to the last four in 2024-25 and excelling again last season, only losing to PSG in the final on penalties, winning all eight of their league stage matches and remaining unbeaten in regulation play throughout, a run of 15 unvanquished fixtures. After the narrow final defeat in Budapest, a significant portion of Mikel Arteta's post-match comments centred on PSG's superior individual quality in attack, and a priority for the North London outfit will be to increase the amount of magic dust in their own ranks. However, after failing to sign a difference-maker in the summer transfer window – unable to persuade megastars Vinicius Junior or Julian Alvarez to move to the Emirates – and losing Gabriel Martinelli (to Al Hilal), Leandro Trossard (Besiktas) and Gabriel Jesus (Barcelona), if anything, the team appears weaker in attack this campaign.

Gunners new boy ...Bruno Guimaraes

How badly will the injured William Saliba be missed in defence?
Saliba arguably is the best centre-back in the world at the moment and forms an excellent partnership in the heart of defence with the Brazilian Gabriel. The £55m signing of Ezri Konsa from Aston Villa could prove crucial until his return.

What should supporters expect from £34m Greek winger Christos Tzolis?
Never mind that Tzolis proved a flop during a two-year spell at Norwich City between 2021 and 2023. At subsequent postings in Germany (Fortuna Dusseldorf) and Belgium (Club Brugge), he has come on leaps and bounds, stronger physically and mentally, and much more effective with his attacking output.

How will Bruno Guimaraes be used?
The Brazilian is a versatile midfielder, able to dominate in either a deep-lying spot or further forward as a No.8. Easing the load on Declan Rice, the £75m man is the total package: industrious, physical, sharp tactically and positive indeed in his passing choices and ball carries.



COACH
Mikel Arteta
The Basque boss, now six-and-a-half years into his Arsenal reign, finally has a league title to flaunt before the "trust the process" crowd.

KEY MAN
Declan Rice
A living, breathing guarantee in midfield of drive, energy, vision and pinpoint set-piece delivery.

YOUNGSTER
Ife Ibrahim
Highly promising defensive midfielder who made his senior debut last season in a Champions League victory over Kairat.

BAYERN MUNICH

German giants targeting the top once again

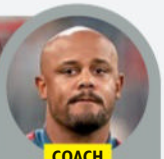
If Bayern make no secret of their desire to perform a clean sweep of major honours (Bundesliga, DFB-Pokal and Champions League) this term, it is the European trophy with the large handles that definitely glitters the most for the ever-ambitious Bavarians. Bayern have not made the final of the competition since 2020 – the last time they lifted the trophy – and what they would give for a seventh appearance on top of the continental pile, a triumph which would allow them to draw level with Milan in second place in the all-time winners' list. Bayern will take great heart from their narrow 5-4 aggregate loss to eventual winners PSG in last season's semi-final, a tie that could have gone either way. The Allianz-Arena outfit will be banking on the benefits of continuity: a coach Vincent Kompany who has had his feet under the table for two years plus, a largely unchanged group of players, and the same old recipe for attacking dominance: insatiable striker Harry Kane flanked by the always effective Luis Diaz and prodigious talent Michael Olise.

Attacking depth... Ismael Saibari

Which individuals will be the most motivated to go all the way?
In his last season as a pro, goalkeeper and skipper Manuel Neuer is keen to sign off by lifting the European big one. As for goal king Kane, how he would love to get his hands on the first continental trophy of a stellar career.

Who in the Bayern camp faces the most testing of seasons?
After spending the vast majority of the 2025-26 campaign recovering from a fractured fibula, attacking midfield star Jamal Musiala struggled at the World Cup and must shed that rustiness. To complicate matters, he twice collapsed on the pitch in August warm-up games and was diagnosed with a treatable neurological condition.

Will £42m new boy Nathaniel Brown make the left-back slot his own?
The ultra-attacking Brown, one of the few members of the Germany side to impress at the World Cup, probably will be the favourite for the starting role. But don't write off Alphonso Davies just yet. If the talismanic Canada captain can avoid the injury problems that have plagued him over the past 12 months, his power and speed on the left flank could come in very useful indeed.



COACH
Vincent Kompany
In two seasons in charge at Bayern, the Belgian has lost five Champions League games out 27.

KEY MAN
Michael Olise
Those with Bayern's best interests at heart will be overjoyed that the Frenchman didn't succumb to the Real Madrid siren song.

YOUNGSTER
Tom Bischof
The 21-year-old midfielder should be deployed much more in the wake of the free transfer granted to Leon Goretzka.

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

Three in a row for the irrepressible Parisians?

Another trophy...PSG captain Marquinhos lifts the 2026 UEFA Super Cup

What next for PSG after the successful defence of their Champions League crown last spring? Obviously the hat-trick. Only a trio of teams have won three or more European Cup/Champions League titles in succession (Real Madrid, Ajax and Bayern Munich) and the omnipotent Ligue 1 outfit would dearly love to join that select band. Following so many years of trying and failing to scale the European summit, PSG now are firmly ensconced on the mountain top and such is their primacy in the game that their president Nasser Al Khelaifi, already head of European Football Clubs and on UEFA's executive committee, is being touted as a possible challenger to embattled FIFA chief Gianni Infantino. Among the new faces in the squad are young wingers, Maghnes Akliouche (ex-Monaco) and Mika Godts (Ajax), France international left-back Lucas Digne, for whom PSG triggered an £8.5m release clause in his contract with Aston Villa, and front-man Ferran Torres (Barcelona), his marketability enormously enhanced by his winning goal for Spain in the World Cup final.

Will Lucas Digne be anything more than a deluxe understudy?

That's about the long and short of it. Portugal's Nuno Mendes, an outstanding performer in every way, has never let PSG down and should remain the starting left-back. The arrival of Digne, first choice for France at World Cup 2026, means more squad depth and rotation options.

Is the position of goalkeeper PSG's Achilles heel?

Most would answer in the affirmative. Both Lucas Chevalier, recruited from Lille at the start of last season, and the Russian Matvey Safonov – who took over from the latter as No.1 midway through the campaign – have their weaknesses, which fortunately for the club tend to be masked by the excellence elsewhere.

Can any of the new boys break into PSG's much-vaunted attack?

After ultimately not wanting to be involved in a transfer market arms race for up-and-coming Ivorian winger Yan Diomande, PSG opted to look elsewhere. A front three of Godts, Akliouche and Ferran would walk into the starting XI for most teams in Europe, but none are likely to oust Kvaratskhelia, Ousmane Dembele or Desire Doue from PSG's starting line-up – and that's with Bradley Barcola's £123m exit for Liverpool easing the competition for attacking places.

COACH

Luis Enrique
Only the second Spaniard to win back-to-back Champions Leagues after Real Madrid's Jose Villalonga in the 1950s.

KEY MAN

Khvicha Kvaratskhelia
The Georgia winger has it all: rapid pace, outrageous dribbling skills, the ability to roam with menace and work ethic. World class.

YOUNGSTER

Dro Fernandez
Very promising attacking midfielder of Spanish and Filipino lineage. Snapped up from Barcelona early this year.

The Heavyweights

REAL MADRID

Record winners turn to an old face

Thirteen years after the curtain fell on his first stint in charge of Real (2010-13), Jose Mourinho is back for another bite of the Bernabeu cherry, with the revival of the club's Champions League fortunes one of his most important objectives. *Los Blancos*, 15-time winners of Europe's most prestigious trophy, have lost their way in the competition of late, sent packing at the quarter-final stage in each of the last two seasons and for such a hungry club, early exits simply aren't tolerated. In Jude Bellingham, Kylian Mbappe, Vinicius Junior – who, after flirting with Arsenal, recently signed a new six-year contract – Thibaut Courtois, Fede Valverde and others, Real boast a wealth of top-drawer talent and added more this summer with the arrival of Spain left-back Marc Cucurella, Dutch right-back Denzel Dumfries, Portugal midfielder Bernardo Silva and Ivory Coast starlet Yan Diomande, a £115m buy from RB Leipzig. What Real need above all else is stability. Two years without a trophy has left everyone at the Bernabeu cranky.

Talent-packed ...Real's Madrid supporting cast

Why did Real president Florentino Perez opt to bring back Mourinho?
In many ways Perez sees Mourinho as a kindred spirit, a man who loves nothing better than to create a siege mentality, an "us against the world" narrative. Perez also appreciates the Special One's no-nonsense managerial style, his refusal to pander to superstar egos.

COACH
Jose Mourinho
A Champions League winner with Porto and Inter, Mourinho has managed in no fewer than eight semi-finals at this level.

KEY MAN
Kylian Mbappe
Fresh from picking up the World Cup Golden Boot, the Frenchman urgently needs to break his UCL duck.

YOUNGSTER
Thiago Pitarch
Homegrown midfielder, 19, a break-out performer last season. Precision passing allied to tactical intelligence.

Linked this spring with Barcelona and Atletico Madrid, Bernardo Silva ultimately decided to join Real. What should Madrid fans expect from the ex-Manchester City star?
At the age of 32, the Portugal schemer probably will not start so frequently, but will be very useful indeed as a "joker", an experienced and versatile player who can bring invention and poise to a raft of briefs: as playmaker, in box-to-box mode or on the right-side of midfield.

Will Mourinho use Jude Bellingham in the No.10 role where he starred for England at the World Cup?
That's Mourinho's intention and with good reason. In the past couple of seasons, Real coaches have, at times, played Bellingham a little too deep. It makes perfect sense to have the former Birmingham City and Dortmund starlet in a free role behind Kylian Mbappe – and with two goals and two assists in his first three La Liga games, so far so good.

LIVERPOOL

Fearsome in attack, lightweight in defence

How quickly the ecstasy of a Premier League triumph in 2024-25 was to turn to ashes at Anfield last term. The £450m spent on new recruits in the August 2025 transfer window – including £116m on German wonder Florian Wirtz – produced little in the way of a collective upgrade and within weeks the Reds were falling apart, going on to lose 20 games across all competitions. A fifth-place domestic league finish was good enough for Champions League qualification. Yet insufficient to protect manager Arne Slot, who in the space of 12 months went from title-winning architect to victim of the Fenway Sports Group axe. New boss Andoni Iraola, much-praised for helping transform Bournemouth into Premier League giant-slayers, favours an aggressive, high-pressing style of play, the sort of front-footed brand of football which made Jurgen Klopp so popular during his unforgettable nine-year spell in the Anfield hot-seat. The noise you can hear is the turning of a transitional page, with long-serving stars such as left-back Andy Robertson and Mo Salah joining Slot in the departure lounge.

Isak...Reds redemption?

What should be Andoni Iraola's priorities in the Reds rebuild?
Liverpool often forgot how to play as a team last season and found consistency elusive. Other areas of concern were the difficulties regularly encountered when defending set-pieces and long balls. Up against a team that parks the bus, the Reds frequently appeared flummoxed.

COACH
Andoni Iraola
The 44-year-old Basque boss has been tasked with steering Liverpool through this transition both on and off the field.

KEY MAN
Dominik Szoboszlai
The Hungarian has developed into a player Liverpool cannot do without – lively, creative, versatile and with a canon-like shot.

YOUNGSTER
Trey Nyoni
The holding midfielder was one of the Reds' most impressive stars during pre-season.

Where lies the weakest link?
In defence. The full-backs signed for big money in 2025, Jeremie Frimpong and Milos Kerkez, both have their limitations defensively, while captain Virgil van Dijk is showing signs of ageing. Conversely, the attack looks explosive – Ngumoha, Barcola, Munoz, Ekitike, Gakpo and Isak is a fearsome combination, especially if the latter can rediscover his form of old.

Could Iraola's lack of European experience be problematic?
The ex-Rayo Vallecano and Bournemouth manager has yet to test himself at any continental level and will have to learn fast. Nor is he used to the thick and fast matchday workload that comes with the territory at a top club.

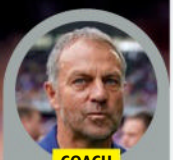
BARCELONA

Rodri to help steer Barca to glory?

Still searching for their first appearance in a Champions League final since 2015 – when they defeated Juventus 3-1 in Berlin – Barca have not been a million miles away from the Holy Grail in the last couple of years. In 2024-25, they were edged out 7-6 on aggregate in a semi-final thriller against Inter and again came up a half-step short in a quarter-final loss to Atletico last season, having a player sent off in both legs. Barca's failure to get over the line is usually blamed on their rearguard fragility, the risky high defensive line favoured by German head coach Hansi Flick. What's often forgotten in such an analysis is the relative lack of depth in the current *Blaugrana* squad. The club's well-documented financial problems has led to a marked reduction in signings and, with fewer options than he would like, Flick only has limited scope to rotate. At a difficult time, club sporting director Deco has done a great job of keeping the balls in the air, negotiating the €50m sale to PSG of back-up striker Ferran Torres – the scorer of the winning goal in the World Cup final – beating Real Madrid to the signature of Rodri, an upgrade if ever there was one, and bolstering the frontline with pure pace in the form of Karim Adeyemi (ex-Borussia Dortmund) and Anthony Gordon (Newcastle United).

Star boy... Lamine Yamal

Now that iconic Poland striker Robert Lewandowski has left for Chicago Fire in the MLS, could Hansi Flick opt for a "false nine" system?
Flick would undoubtedly prefer a genuine 20-goal-a-season marksman, though has been talking of late of using a shape-shifter who goes walkabout in the attacking third. Flick claims that many of his squad could fit that bill, including Lamine Yamal, Dani Olmo or new signings Gordon and Adeyemi. A more traditional choice could be to deploy Gabriel Jesus, a deadline-day signing from Arsenal, as the No.9, but even then, the Brazilian has often cited his preference to cut inside playing from out wide. A riskier move would be to unleash Egypt tyro Hamza Abdelkarim.



COACH
Hansi Flick
A Champions League winner at Bayern, he seems much more at home in club football than when Germany's *Bundestrainer*.

KEY MAN
Lamine Yamal
The first player under 20 to win both the Euros and World Cup. Pure class from head to toe.

YOUNGSTER
Hamza Abdelkarim
The 18-year-old Egypt striker, a World Cup participant this summer, is a natural-born *goleador*, who has been dubbed the "New Salah".

The consequences of the Rodri deal?
First and foremost, Barca have improved their midfield department exponentially, adding one of the best pivots in the world game and an inspirational leader to boot. There will be fewer starts for Gavi and Marc Bernal, while Frankie de Jong, currently sidelined with a knee injury, faces an uncertain future.

Which player best represents the Barca spirit under Hansi Flick?
Undoubtedly Raphinha. In a youthful team, the Brazilian winger arguably is the individual with the strongest mentality at the club, never one to hoist the white flag, keen to promote team unity and someone who relishes the responsibility of leadership both on matchdays and in the dressing room.

MANCHESTER CITY

Maresca ready for "Mission Impossible"

Newly-installed City manager Enzo Maresca effectively accepted Mission Impossible when agreeing to succeed the inimitable Pep Guardiola early this summer. Guardiola, the mastermind of a trophy-laden decade at the Etihad Stadium, took City to historic heights, and part of his unique legacy is a pair of shoes too big for anyone to fill. Maresca, formerly a member of Pep's backroom staff, has an intimate knowledge of the City operation, but had a mixed experience in his last job at Chelsea, the praise he earned for leading the Blues to the Club World Cup title in marked contrast to fans constantly grumbling about his team selection, substitutions and safety-first instincts. End-of-an-era vibes aplenty, accentuated by the departure of such long-term stalwarts as midfielder Bernardo Silva (Real Madrid), centre-back John Stones (Inter) and, most damaging of all, engine-room anchor man Rodri who left for Barcelona in a £65m deal. Exits for James Trafford, Tijjani Reijnders, Nico Gonzalez and Savio also boosted the club coffers. England midfield untouchable Elliot Anderson, signed for a jaw-dropping £116m fee from Nottingham Forest, has been brought in to help plug the Rodri-shaped hole, along with teenage talent Ayyoub Bouaddi (£85.7m from Lille) and Enzo Fernandez, who joins for a joint-British record £125m to seal a reunion with his old Chelsea boss.

Back in the picture... attacking midfielder Phil Foden

Why should City fans remain confident of punching their weight in Europe?
At certain points last season, City looked thoroughly underwhelming. But refusing to give up the ghost, stayed relevant until the end, making eventual Premier League champions Arsenal sweat in the final few weeks of the title run-in and claiming the two domestic cup trophies.

COACH
Enzo Maresca
As he proved when his Chelsea side outsmarted PSG in the 2025 Club World Cup final, the Italian is anything but a slouch in a tactical battle of wits.

KEY MAN
Erling Haaland
City always have a chance with a No.9 of the calibre of the imposing Norwegian.

YOUNGSTER
Ryan McAidoo
Outstanding teenage winger, a natural in one-on-one play. Scored on his debut for City last season.

Which of their younger players should we expect to move up to the next level?
In his inaugural season as a first-team regular, left-back Nico O'Reilly improved week on week and fully deserved to feature for England at the World Cup. France playmaker Rayan Cherki, all personality and vivid technique, will be looking to catch the eye of new *Les Bleus* coach Zinedine Zidane.

Is first-choice keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma world-class?
If the Italy custodian is rated among the best in the world, it's almost entirely because of his excellent shot-stopping ability. He does have weaknesses, however, not least his discomfort with the ball at his feet and tendency to flap at crosses.

The Heavyweights

INTERNAZIONALE

Hoping to translate their domestic form to Europe

The Italian champions have a pressing need to exorcise a couple of Champions League demons: their abject performance in the 5-0 thrashing by PSG in the final of the 2024-25 edition and the added embarrassment of a comprehensive loss to the Norwegians of Bodo/Glimt in last season's knockout round play-offs, beaten in both legs. Inter, European champions on three occasions and runners-up five times, like to see themselves as the ultimate battle-hardened competitors, the unflinching kings of pragmatism. With three Serie A titles in the last six seasons, Inter's domestic dominance is there for all to see; they have the deepest roster, the most technically-gifted players and superiority of spirit. But up against different types of opposition in Europe, they have struggled to adapt of late. Completely undone in the 2025 final by PSG's pace, intensity and slick passing, Inter looked just as bemused by the problem's posed last term by giant-killing Bodo/Glimt.

Marksman-in-chief... captain Lautaro Martinez

Who will be the new No.1 after Yann Sommer left for Club Brugge?
Logically, the Spaniard Josep Martinez, Sommer's understudy last season, will step up. However, it's not quite so clear-cut since Inter acquired the experienced Ivan Provedel from Lazio. One possible scenario could be a job share, with one keeper deployed in the Champions League and the other domestically.

COACH
Cristian Chivu
A trusty left-back in the Inter side which won the 2009-10 UCL, the Romanian began his coaching career with the club's youth team.

KEY MAN
Federico Dimarco
The 28-year-old has blossomed into one of the most productive left-backs in Europe, supplying assists at will.

YOUNGSTER
Andy Diouf
Indefatigable and enterprising French full-back or versatile midfielder. Bought from Lens in 2025.

Inter went big in the Premier League marketplace this summer, snapping up Djed Spence (ex-Spurs), John Stones (Manchester City) and Curtis Jones (Liverpool). Good business?
Provided the trio adapt well to a new, unfamiliar foreign environment, they should bring much added-value to Inter, especially with regard to the Premier League lifeblood of physicality and will-to-win. Speedy full-back Spence, a revelation for England at the World Cup, is an excellent replacement for the Real Madrid-bound Denzel Dumfries.

How reliant are Inter on skipper and marksman-in-chief Lautaro Martinez?
Renowned for his voracious desire, clinical finishing and prodigious work-rate, the Argentina striker has been an Inter standard-bearer for eight wonderful years, piling up close to 200 goals. The *Nerazzurri's* other forwards, Marcus Thuram, Ange-Yoan Bonny and Pio Esposito, do not come close.

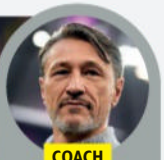
BORUSSIA DORTMUND

Young, vibrant and ready to make another splash

Distant runners-up in the Bundesliga last season, the *Schwarz-Gelben* could be dismissed as the "Best of the Rest" in Germany. But let's not forget the illustrious inner core of the Ruhr club: an unmistakeable global football hot-spot, a stadium fit for a king, a massive fanbase and a proud track record in the Champions League. They have a habit of pulling out all the stops in Europe's premier arena and as well lifting the trophy in 1996-97, achieved runners-up honours in 2012-13 and 2023-24. As has long been the case here, Dortmund have centred their recruitment operation this summer on up-and-coming talent, bringing in Greek No.10 or winger Konstantinos Karetsas – a €30m purchase from Belgian side Genk – French centre-back Joane Gadou (ex-Red Bull Salzburg), Ecuadorian playmaker Justin Lerma (Independiente del Valle) and attacking midfielder Ethan Nwaneri (Arsenal, on loan). Another Greece international, Giannis Konstantelias, 23, an attacking midfielder of much promise, arrived from PAOK but suffered an ACL injury on his Bundesliga debut.

Fresh face... Konstantinos Karetsas

Are BVB in transition right now?
New director of sport Ole Book clearly had been busy working on a fresh chapter for Dortmund. Out with the old guard, in with the uncut diamonds. The message emerging from the club's corridors of power is that they want the team to play with more sparkle and bravery.



COACH
Niko Kovac
In 18 months at the helm, the ex-Eintracht and Bayern boss has stabilised a team which was verging on the dysfunctional.

KEY MAN
Felix Nmecha
Many have likened the athletic, dynamic and skilful central midfielder to the one-time French great Paul Pogba.

YOUNGSTER
Joane Gadou
Once on PSG's books, the composed centre-back recently arrived from Red Bull Salzburg for €20m.

How important is it for Germany centre-back Nico Schlotterbeck to return to fitness as soon as possible?
Schlotterbeck not only is BVB's most intransigent defender, hard as nails and uncompromising, he sets the emotional tone for the side too. In a way, his ankle injury was beneficial to Dortmund, putting paid to any transfer talk. Expected to be back in late September/early October.

Who should start in central midfield?
Three players seem to be in contention for the two spots: young Englishman Jobe Bellingham, who has been looking the part in pre-season, Germany national teamer Felix Nmecha, one of the rare *Nationalelf* successes at the World Cup, and Netherlands link-man Joey Veerman, signed recently from PSV for €22m.

ATLETICO MADRID

Uncompromising and never to be underestimated

While long-serving Atletico head coach Diego Simeone would vehemently deny it, the *Colchoneros* always seem to save a portion of their trademark grit and defensive discipline for the midweek battles in the Champions League. Never the most fluent of sides or the most progressive, they confidently back themselves to outfight and outlast any European opponent and over the last three decades have turned the underdog story into a best-seller, twice losing finalists, reaching the last four on two other occasions and five times quarter-finalists. After ten seasons of peerless service at the Metropolitano across two separate spells, French playmaker Antoine Griezmann finally bid the club *adieu* this summer – opting to join Orlando City in the US – and how his sumptuous skills will be missed. The good news for the fans is the quality of the latest intake of signings: Spain left-back Alex Grimaldo (ex-Leverkusen), Denmark holding midfielder Morten Hjulmand (Sporting), South Korea creator Lee Kang-in (PSG), teak-tough Argentina centre-back Cristian Romero (a £34m signing from Spurs) and Canada striker Jonathan David (on loan from Juventus). Even more important could be the retention of star striker Julian Alvarez. But after the summer transfer saga, with Barcelona making public their interest in signing the Argentina ace, plus the deafening jeers he received from the Atleti fans in August, it will be fascinating to see how this reconciliation pans out.

Danger team... Atletico

COACH
Diego Simeone
Fifteen years into his Atletico reign, the ethos remains the same, prioritising the indomitable attitude of the team over the chessboard.

KEY MAN
Pablo Barrios
Sidelined by a thigh injury in the second half of last season, the midfielder's ability to turn with the ball and drive forward was sorely missed.

YOUNGSTER
Arnau Ortiz
Catalan left-winger, who could not stop scoring for Atletico's reserves last season.

Who will be Atletico's main source of frontline punch in Europe?

On arriving from Atalanta midway through last season, dynamic Nigeria left-winger or second striker Ademola Lookman quickly became an Atleti talisman in knockout competitions, scoring seven times in the Champions League and Copa del Rey, as well as providing four assists. Along with Alvarez, Norway targetman Alexander Sorloth, new boy David and creative kings Lee Kang-in and Alex Baena, Simeone is flush with attacking options.

Of all their summer recruits, who is the most underrated?

Outside of his native Denmark and Portugal – where he used to skipper Sporting – engine-room leader Morten Hjulmand is something of a well-kept secret, a natural leader, fount of tactical awareness, composed on the ball and excellent at closing down passing lanes, more mobile barrier than brute force ball-winner.

What might turn out to be Simeone's biggest tactical headache this term?

New boy Grimaldo is the type of hybrid player, part left-sided wing-back, part central playmaker, who must be placed in exactly the right context. Give him the freedom to float and he can work wonders in open play. The key is to find a system that provides him with ample cover.

MANCHESTER UNITED

Back in Europe – can Carrick pass his next test?

The decision of the United brass to hand Michael Carrick a two-year contract as head coach was inevitable after the latter's outstanding work in a supposed stop-gap role in the second half of last season. Appointed on an interim basis when Ruben Amorim was sacked, Carrick proved an instant hit, restoring belief, spirit and purpose to a moribund outfit, overseeing an excellent sequence of results (39 Premier League points from a possible 48) and securing Champions League qualification, an unthinkable prospect just a few months earlier. Carrick, a long-serving Red Devils midfielder, unquestionably saved United's season. But the real test of his leadership mettle awaits. Another United playing legend, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, went on an impressive winning streak as a caretaker boss at Old Trafford in 2018-19, only to generally struggle when given the reins permanently. Carrick will not want to suffer the same fate. With the side back in the Champions League for the first time in two years, the aim will be to make the knockout phase at the very least. In their last outing in the competition in 2023-24, they finished rock-bottom of their group, winning just one in six.

Attacking dilemma... Mbeumo

COACH
Michael Carrick
A United first-teamer for 12 seasons, he racked up 70 games in the UCL, and was on the winning side in the 2007-08 final.

KEY MAN
Bruno Fernandes
Without the Portugal No.10's creativity (21 PL assists last term), United are not remotely the same.

YOUNGSTER
JJ Gabriel
About to turn 16, the United academy sensation, a striker of rare promise, made his first-team bow in pre-season.

Who will Carrick deploy as the two controlling midfielders in his favoured 4-2-3-1 system?

United are spoilt for choice in this department, with five players vying for role of starter: new signings Youri Tielemans (ex-Aston Villa), Andrey Santos (Chelsea) and Carlos Baleba (Brighton) plus the English pair of Kobbie Mainoo and Mason Mount, who was especially impressive in pre-season until picking up yet another knock.

In which position does Bryan Mbeumo offer the most threat: right-wing or centre-forward?

The Cameroon international has proven a top performer in either role, though he arguably looks more comfortable leading the line, where he offers crafty off-the-ball runs, astute link-up play and finishing prowess. He's not as strong as Slovenia striker Benjamin Sesko, nor as explosive as Matheus Cunha, but he is the most reliable. Playing him up front also allows Carrick the option to start Amad Diallo.

Which player needs to stand up?

French centre-back Leny Yoro, bought from Lille two years ago, once had the great and the good in Europe drooling over him. But he has yet to truly make his mark at Old Trafford, starting only 30 Premier League games in two seasons. Held back by a number of injuries, he now has to deliver.

The Dark Horses

ASTON VILLA

Rebuild required at Villa Park

Although Villa only have featured in three previous European Cup/Champions League campaigns, they most definitely have a trump card in the continental arena in manager Unai Emery, who has won the Europa League on no fewer than five occasions: three times with Sevilla, once at Villarreal and again last season with Villa. In his four years at Villa Park, Emery, he of the perfectionist eye, has wrought a minor miracle, taking a flat-lining Premier League club and swiftly establishing new, higher standards before sending them into orbit. Emery, who steered Villa to the quarter-finals of the Champions League in 2024-25, has a reputation for getting his side to perform when it matters most and the European top-level certainly is that. His substantial know-how, impressive work ethic and competence as a teacher will be put to good use in the top-to-bottom overhaul he has to take care of, a squad rebuild forced upon him by the sales of brilliant No.10 Morgan Rogers (Chelsea, £117m), midfielder Youri Tielemans (Manchester United, £35m), centre-back Ezri Konsa (Arsenal, £55m) and prolific striker Ollie Watkins (Al Hilal, £50m), not to mention experienced heads like keeper Emiliano Martinez and left-back Lucas Digne, exiting for Chelsea and PSG respectively.

New No.1...Japan keeper Zion Suzuki

Given the exodus, who from the new signings will most need to step up?
It will be particularly fascinating to see how Rogers and Watkins' goal output will be replaced. The hope is that Nicolas Jackson and Ibrahim Mbaye, both signed for just under £50m each from Chelsea and PSG respectively, can replicate their chemistry for Senegal, with dynamic winger Alejandro Garnacho, signed on loan from Chelsea, chipping in too.

What is the best position of £51m Swiss international Johan Manzambi?
The 20-year-old, fresh from a string of stand-out World Cup displays, is another who'll provide goals. Using him as a No.10 will best exploit his one-on-one brilliance and hunger to make tracks for goal.

Some of Emery's most-trusted backroom collaborators departed this summer. A potential problem?
Assistant manager Pako Ayestaran, set-piece coach Austin MacPhee and individual instructor Antonio Rodriguez Saravia all played crucial roles in the Villa renaissance under Emery. Winning teams, whether starting XIs or on the coaching front, thrive on continuity.

COACH
Unai Emery
A repeat laureate in the Europa League, he is no stranger to the UCL either, managing 65 games.

KEY MAN
John McGinn
Now in his ninth season at Villa Park, the busy, flexible and indomitable Scotland midfielder is the XI's heart and soul.

YOUNGSTER
Ibrahim Mbaye
A £47m summer signing from PSG, 18, who caught the eye with a stunning goal for Senegal against France at the World Cup.

NAPOLI

Sky Blues are Italy's dark horses

New Napoli coach Massimiliano Allegri, who recently stepped into the *Gli Azzurri* breach when Antonio Conte headed for the exit, reportedly has eschewed his predecessor's iron fist for a considerably more collegiate approach. Whereas Conte, a Serie A winner with Napoli in 2024-25, often instructed his side to metaphorically don helmets in readiness for the fight, Allegri has gone for a softer type of man-management in pre-season, preferring communication to confrontation and work with the ball to boot-camp fare. While second place in Serie A last term was far from the end of the world, there were unmistakeable signs of decay: an ageing team, too may injuries, defensive vulnerability and profligacy in front of goal. With Belgium striker Romelu Lukaku – who was sidelined for almost all of last season through injury – leaving for Turkish giants Fenerbahce, the role of line leader has passed on to Rasmus Hojlund. After a successful loan period from Manchester United, the Denmark striker has now moved to Naples on a permanent deal.

Here to stay... Rasmus Hojlund

How close was Belgium midfield playmaker Kevin De Bruyne to leaving the club this summer?
If Antonio Conte had remained in charge, De Bruyne unquestionably would have departed post-haste. He and Conte never saw eye-to-eye and in an explosive interview with the Belgian newspaper *Nieuwsblad*, De Bruyne vented his dislike for Conte's negative tactics.

What formation will Allegri favour?
In pre-season Allegri mainly deployed a 4-3-3, though experimented at times with a 4-2-3-1 and a 3-5-2. The key to the 4-3-3 will be the effectiveness of the midfield trident formed by Slovak anchor man Stanislav Lobotka flanked by De Bruyne and Scott McTominay. Napoli have an abundance of good quality wide attackers. Allegri intends to use them.

Who will take over from centre-back Alessandro Buongiorno, who recently underwent knee surgery?
Napoli's remedy was a loan deal with Chelsea for the towering 25-year-old Frenchman Benoit Badiashile. The Sky Blues have an option to sign him permanently for a €27m fee.

COACH
Massimiliano Allegri
Fans will not want to be reminded of the 2017-18 season, when Allegri's Juve pipped Napoli to the Serie A title.

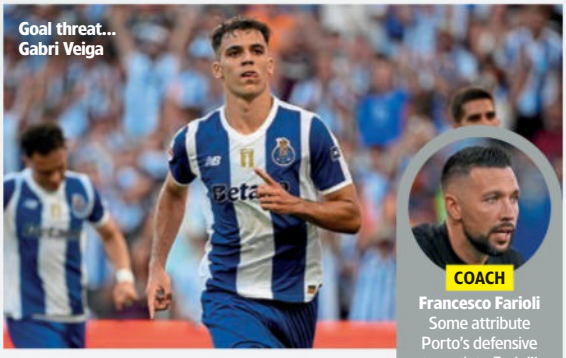
KEY MAN
Scott McTominay
Always present and correct on the big stage, the goalscoring Scotland midfielder is Napoli's MVP.

YOUNGSTER
Alisson
The Brazilian winger very much caught the eye during a loan spell from Sporting last season, earning a four-year contract.

PORTO

Not pretty, but effective

Portugal's reigning champions, intelligently marshalled by the Italian coach Francesco Farioli, remain faithful to the club's time-honoured tradition for substance over style. When the chips are down they know how to battle through, and this was the case in last season's Portuguese championship race. The Dragons, champions for the first time in four long years, were not the most adventurous or thrilling side in the Primeira Liga, but what they did have was greater resourcefulness, bigger hearts and a rock-solid backline, only conceding 15 goals in 32 fixtures. They rarely beat anyone with sophistication; more often than not, they simply overpowered the opposition with a blitz of hard-running, athleticism and desire. Some might say that they found their level in Europe last term, beaten at the quarter-final stage of the Europa League by Nottingham Forest. Fans here would have been relieved that none of their most valuable players – goalkeeper Diogo Costa, Danish central midfielder Victor Froholdt and Spanish playmaker Gabri Veiga – were lured away, while incoming transfers saw South Korea midfielder Hwang In-beom arrive from Feyenoord and winger Gabriel Mec join from Gremio. There was also a trio of intriguing loan signings – left-back Souza from Tottenham Hotspur, Mexico striker Santiago Gimenez from Milan and Ivory Coast midfielder Seko Fofana, who extended his loan spell at the Estadio do Dragao from Rennes for another season.



Goal threat... Gabri Veiga

COACH
Francesco Farioli
Some attribute Porto's defensive strength to Farioli's stint as a goalkeeping coach at Italian clubs Benevento and Sassuolo.

KEY MAN
Victor Froholdt
Exceptional midfield all-rounder who never stops running, creating and battling. Goals, assists and total effervescence.

YOUNGSTER
Oskar Pietuszewski
The Poland winger, 18, settled in quickly following a January transfer from Jagiellonia Bialystok.

Why is Farioli such a great fit?

The ex-Nice and Ajax boss is a carbon copy of successful club predecessors, Jose Mourinho and Sergio Conceicao, disciples of physicality, grit and a "let's take on the world" mentality. At a time of financial concerns for the Dragons, Farioli is the perfect man for the job: a hard-headed realist, rational, methodical and full of conviction.

With star striker Samu Aghehowa out until November after rupturing knee ligaments, who will be taking up the slack at the point of attack?

That role will fall to the experienced former Portugal international Andre Silva, 30, who after almost a decade earning his corn in Italy, Spain and Germany, recently returned to the club where it all began for him. It's been a career of highs and lows for Silva, though he insists he is still a contender for the national team.

Can the centre-back pairing of Jan Bednarek and Jakub Kiwior, so impressive domestically last season, keep up the good work in Europe?

That's the million-dollar question. Both players were outstanding in the Primeira Liga in 2025-26, working excellently in unison. But as the Poland duo showed during their time in English football – Bednarek with Southampton and Aston Villa; Kiwior at Arsenal – they can be found out by top-quality forwards.

GALATASARAY

Rubbing shoulders with the big boys

What do Liverpool skipper Virgil van Dijk, Bruno Fernandes of Manchester United and Bayern Munich ace Jamal Musiala all have in common? The answer: all three were linked with Galatasaray in the off-season, smoke and mirror media tales which fans of the *Cim-Bom* have gobbled up, only too keen to go along with the belief that their beloved club is one of the movers and shakers in European football.

Despite winning the Turkish league title in each of the last four seasons, the Galatasaray faithful are an eternally dissatisfied lot and have been virulently critical of club president Dursun Ozbek in recent times, accusing him of dragging his feet in the recruitment stakes and not bringing in the big names the fans crave. The 2026 close season saw the much-lamented departure of talismanic Argentine striker Mauro Icardi, who left as a free agent after four years of sterling service. In his successful time at the club, the charismatic frontrunner, formerly of PSG, Inter and Sampdoria, scored 77 goals in 134 games. He leaves a hole that will be exceedingly difficult to fill.

Prolific striker... Victor Osimhen

COACH
Okan Buruk
Recently became the longest-serving coach in a single stint at Gala, overtaking legend Fatih Terim.

KEY MAN
Gabriel Sara
Brazilian midfield maestro, composed, technically sound, always demanding the ball and superb at setting the tempo.

YOUNGSTER
Lesley Ugochukwu
On loan from Burnley, the 22-year-old French midfielder is especially adept at breaking up attacks and driving forward.

Galatasaray have high hopes for the Russian attacking midfielder Aleksey Batrakov, a €25m summer signing from Lokomotiv Moscow. Is the hype and optimism justified?

The 21-year-old No.10, who came through the Lokomotiv youth ranks, is, by common consent, the most exciting talent in the Russian game right now, voted the top flight's Young Player of the Season in 2024-25 and 2025-26. Excellent on the half-turn and an expert in making late runs into the penalty box.

After a set of disappointing results in pre-season, what will be worrying head coach Okan Buruk the most?

Undoubtedly the weakness of his backline, the lack of communication and positional common sense, as well as the schoolboy errors. Buruk will be hoping that the loan signing of French defender El Chadaille Bitshiabu from RB Leipzig, as well as extending the contract of Gabon defensive midfielder Mario Lemina – who was heavily linked with a move to Al Shabab in Saudi Arabia – will help remedy the side's defensive woes.

How to replace Icardi's goal output?

Gala already have a goal machine in the form of Nigeria striker Victor Osimhen – the club's top scorer for each of the past two campaigns – but, not resting on their laurels, the club signed Turkey ace Deniz Gul from Porto for €10m and enigmatic Portugal winger Rafael Leao from Milan for €45m. A frontline of Osimhen, Leao and Leroy Sane – with Gul, Yunus Akgun and Baris Alper Yilmaz in reserve – will be an intimidating prospect indeed for opposition defences to try to stifle.

The Dark Horses

ROMA

Gasperini's Roma revival ready for next step

Specifically headhunted 15 months ago to spark a Roma revival, coaching miracle worker Gian Piero Gasperini duly supplied one, steering the *Giallorossi* to a third-place finish in Serie A, their ticket to a first Champions League rendezvous since the 2018-19 season. When it comes to accessing the European scene and putting on a show there, Gasperini very much is the man, notably leading Atalanta to five Champions League qualifications and victory over Bayer Leverkusen in the 2023-24 Europa League final. Gasperini, not one to mince his words or ever to seek compromise, has been happy to inform all and sundry that incoming transfers should have been wrapped up much earlier this summer. Nonetheless, he should be happy with the club's business, making Donyell Malen's move from Aston Villa permanent and adding further new boys in the form of Portugal attacking midfield boy wonder Rodrigo Mora (ex-Porto), Greece centre-back Konstantinos Koulierakis (Wolfsburg), Netherlands schemer Marten de Roon (Atalanta) and a trio of Argentines in the form of right-back Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid), striker Santiago Castro (Bologna) and defender Leonardo Balerdi (Marseille).

Deal made permanent... Donyell Malen

What is Roma's transfer strategy under the club's American owners?
Rejuvenating the squad is a key aim and much of the current pro group are aged under 25. The emphasis on the long-term development of youngsters makes perfect sense when you have a specialist in this field in the form of Gasperini.

Can outstanding teenage playmaker Rodrigo Mora flourish in Rome?
In a point in the near-future, Porto coach Francesco Farioli may well have to account for his somewhat mysterious allergy to deploying the silky skills of the 19-year-old Mora. He's a super young player, and Porto's loss is Roma's gain.

Why did Italy centre-back Gianluca Mancini turn down a lucrative offer to join Internazionale this summer?
Mancini is arguably the most-idolised of all the Roma stars and just could not tear himself away from the club which means so much to him. "When you are part of a family, it's difficult to break away." The *Azzurri* central defender duly signed a new contract at the club, taking him through until 2029.

COACH
Gian Piero Gasperini
Legendary coach Giovanni Trapattoni is convinced Gasperini would be a great boss for Italy.

KEY MAN
Donyell Malen
The pacy Dutch attacker could not stop scoring after joining Roma on loan from Aston Villa in January.

YOUNGSTER
Niccolo Pisilli
Rising star of the Italian game, a midfielder combining dynamism, guts and a flair for joining the attack at just the right moment.

SPORTING

All change at the Alvalade

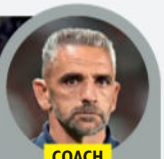
Lisbon Lions coach Rui Borges has a major reconstruction job on his hands after a swathe of his most accomplished performers were offloaded this summer, including Senegal centre-back Ousmane Diomande (Nottingham Forest), winger Geovany Quenda (Chelsea), defensive midfielder Morten Hjulmand (Atletico Madrid), No.10 Francisco Trincao (Al Ahli), attacker Pedro Goncalves (Fiorentina) and Japan schemer Hidemasa Morita (Hull City). Sporting president Frederico Varandas, rendered apoplectic by the club's sorry capitulation to second-tier Torreense in the Portuguese Cup final in May, clearly felt the time was right for a clear-out. But was he merely over-reacting to one bad day at the office? Many of the same players had delivered in spades in recent times, winning back-to-back Portuguese titles (2023-24 and 2024-25) and generally showing up well last term, finishing Primeira Liga runners-up and reaching the Champions League quarter-finals, their deepest run in the competition since 1982-83.

All change... Sporting have had a refresh

Unjustified player cull or necessary squad refresh?
It goes without saying that Sporting have, in the course of one transfer window, lost a huge amount of know-how (in excess of 1,000 first-team appearances). The club's rationale for the overhaul is the urgent need to initiate a new cycle, kick-starting it with a concerted recruitment drive for the young and the hungry.

Who are the most promising of the new recruits?
On the evidence of pre-season, Italy U21 schemer Issa Doumbia (ex-Venezia) and Spanish defensive midfielder Sergi Altimira (Real Betis), both of whom have hit the ground running at the Alvalade, should have no trouble at all making an impact on the Champions League scene.

Which of the new signings represents the best value for money?
Sporting spent a club record €30m on the Braga attacking midfielder Rodrigo Salazar and surely will not regret it. The 27-year-old Uruguayan international, comfortable as a No.10 or on the right wing, is a runaway train with the ball at his feet and an assured finisher.



COACH
Rui Borges
For all the success he has brought the club, he still has many detractors in the Sporting Nation.

KEY MAN
Goncalo Inacio
The most technically-proficient centre-back in Portuguese football. More than 20 caps for Portugal.

YOUNGSTER
Flavio Goncalves
Wonderfully-gifted attacking midfielder or winger with the brain and the ball-skills to always find solutions. Still only 19. Big future.

RB LEIPZIG

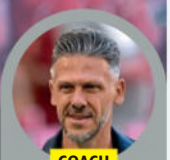
Life after Diomande

After a 12-month absence from the Champions League, the *Roten Bullen* are once again in the elite European mix, a perfect opportunity for the Saxons to ruffle some feathers with their brand of quick, direct and aggressive football. Despite steering RB to a third-place finish in the Bundesliga last season, head coach Ole Werner was promptly shown the door, deemed guilty by then Red Bull global head Jurgen Klopp of not letting rip with the high-pressing game and generally being too beige in his outlook. Werner's successor, the former Bayern Munich central defender Martin Demichelis, basically has three missions to fulfil: to instil greater fervour in the squad, play more attractively, and place a lot more faith in youth. What a shame that the Leipziger proved unable to retain the brightest young star in their firmament, forced reluctantly to green light the £115m sale to Real Madrid of the brilliant 19-year-old Ivory Coast wing wizard Yan Diomande. Like it or not, RB simply had to bow to the inevitable, forced to compensate for the loss of Champions League income last term with the substantial proceeds of the Diomande sale.

Back at Leipzig ...Christoper Nkunku

The departure of Yan Diomande leaves the club with a big hole to fill. What's RB's solution?

Instinctively the Leipzig powerbrokers would prefer to look for the answers in-house, giving more responsibility to both Norwegian wide-man Antonio Nusa and Germany Under-21 attacking all-rounder Brajan Gruda who, after a successful loan at Leipzig last term from Brighton, extended his spell in Saxony for another season. However, extra stardust was still deemed necessary, so Leipzig secured the services of France forward Christopher Nkunku on loan from Milan. The 28-year-old was a major hit in his first spell at the club between 2019 and 2023, scoring 70 goals in 172 appearances and, after suffering something of a blip at Chelsea, he'll be looking to rejuvenate his career amid familiar surroundings.



COACH
Martin Demichelis
Starred for seven-and-a-half seasons at Bayern Munich. Has managed in Mexico, Argentina and Spain.

KEY MAN
Brajan Gruda
Whether used in a box-to-box role, as a No.10 or wide on the right, he is the ultimate street player, always unorthodox.

YOUNGSTER
Tidiam Gomis
The young French striker of left-winger is something of a one-off, speedy and elusive, but also tall and tough.

Who will lead the line this season?

The tall and technically polished Brazilian Romulo appears to be the main man here, boasting plenty of stealth and punch in the box, as well as the ability to come deep to link the play. Not one to loiter in the box and wait for others to load the gun for him, he is a free spirit. Youngster Tidiam Gomis is another No.9 contender, while the deadline-day signing of Marc Guiu from Chelsea bolsters the options.

What is the preferred formation of new coach Martin Demichelis?

His RB should line up in a 4-3-3, a system featuring a pair of extremely adventurous full-backs and a disciplined defensive midfield ball-winner. While his side will press high and intensively, he also puts a premium on keeping the ball and maintaining control. All-out risk-taking is not his way.

COMO

Italian upstarts ready to shock Europe next

A pair of billionaire brothers from Indonesia – Robert Budi Hartono and Michael Bambang Hartono – once had a dream of owning a top European football club and, piece by piece, act by act, have made it happen. A pipeline of benefactor cash to bankroll it all; an outstanding recruitment policy based on swoops for foreign youngsters of great potential and an excellent young coach in Cesc Fabregas, who besides elite playing career know-how, brought with him progressive ideas and a natural authority. This is the story of the unfashionable northern Italian club, who, in the course of just seven years, clambered from the fourth tier of the *Calcio* pyramid to reach the promised land of the Champions League. A remarkable fourth place in Serie A last season, Como have spent liberally on reinforcements this summer, the new arrivals including a pair of centre-backs in Trevoh Chalobah (ex-Chelsea) and former Barcelona academy pupil Andres Cuenca; Brazilian right-back Yan Couto, a 12-month loanee from Dortmund; another Brazilian in the left-back/wing-back Kaiki; Mattia Liberali, a highly-rated attacking midfielder or winger from Serie B side Catanzaro; Italy anchorman Samuele Ricci (Milan); and deadline-day loan signings Moise Kean (Fiorentina) and Robert Sanchez (Chelsea).

Italian upstarts ...Como

Will Como, a team with few Italians, have problems assembling a squad for the Champions League?

In short, yes. With UEFA ruling that each 25-man squad contains four homegrown players and another four originating in other Italian academies, Como are hard-pressed to comply – hence the signings of Liberali, Ricci and Kean. Domestically, they benefit from an eligibility loophole for U23 players, an exemption which does not exist in UEFA competitions.

COACH
Cesc Fabregas
The season he made his senior debut for Arsenal (2003-04), Como finished rock-bottom of Serie B.

KEY MAN
Nico Paz
Brilliant Argentina No.10, whose father Pablo also played for the national team but as a centre-back. Nico's left foot is a work of art.

YOUNGSTER
Jesus Rodriguez
A dribbling machine of a winger, full of tricks and flair. Only 20 and already two full caps for Spain.

Why are Como so disliked by Italian football fans in general?

Jealously towards the minnows-made-good plays a part, as does the feeling that they are an artificial "Johnny-Come-Lately" set-up, a little like RB Leipzig and Hoffenheim in Germany. Others take exception to the fact that only a handful of their 50+ signings since 2024 have been homegrown.

Which of the new signings could make the most impact?

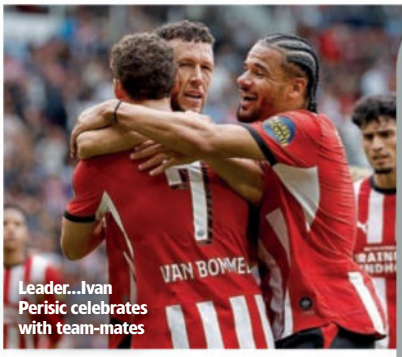
Playmaker or wide-man Mattia Liberali, still just 19 years old, appears to have all the makings of a class act: the vision, exceptional technical quality, imagination and perfect balance. Milan, whose youth academy Liberali used to attend before declaring him surplus to requirements, must be kicking themselves.

The Outsiders

PSV

Dominant domestically, but room for improvement

PSV did not waste any time clinching the Eredivisie title last season, their third consecutive Dutch championship, wrapping up proceedings five rounds shy of the final curtain. No Dutch side had ever clinched the top-flight spoils so quickly and just to make their achievement even more remarkable, they did it in what was supposed to be a transitional season, forced to rebuild after half-a-dozen first-teamers departed stage left in the summer of 2025. That PSV were so able to seamlessly regenerate with a host of new faces says everything about the team-building expertise of coach Peter Bosz. Fortunately for PSV, there has been no mass exodus this summer, though they undoubtedly will miss the Morocco attacking midfielder/forward Ismael Saibari, who Bayern Munich lured away in a €50m deal. When PSV were a force in Europe – winning the UEFA Cup in 1977-78 and the European Cup in 1987-88 – they boasted squads jam-packed with top-class Benelux and Scandinavian talent. Those days, sadly, are gone forever. The Eindhoven outfit have not appeared in a Champions League quarter-final since 2007.



Leader...Ivan Perisic celebrates with team-mates

What are the pros and cons of Peter Bosz's philosophy?

On the plus side, Bosz demands a fluid, pro-active style, with an abundance of positional rotations and an intensive high press. Offensive fireworks come as standard. A frequently-heard criticism of Bosz over the years is that his teams are vulnerable when losing possession.

COACH
Peter Bosz
In his fourth season at PSV, the ex-*Oranje* midfielder will, sooner or later, be Netherlands coach.

KEY MAN
Guus Til
Much-underrated attacking midfielder or centre-forward. Strangely ignored by various *Oranje* bosses. Hit 17 goals in all competitions last season.

YOUNGSTER
Amir Bouhamdi
This scintillating Dutch-Moroccan left-winger, 18, is widely-tipped to have a massive break-out season.

Where is their biggest weakness?

At centre-back especially they have their problems: insufficient steel and a tendency to make crass mistakes. The jury is out on whether the likes of Ryan Flamingo, Armando Obispo or Yarek Gasiorowski are of the required quality. How badly they miss rock-solid holding midfielder Jerdy Schouten, out for the long-term after damaging an ACL.

Can Sven Mijnans, acquired from AZ, fill the void left by Ismael Saibari?

Mijnans is a fine player, full of vision, energy and goalscoring capability. But by no means is a like-for-like replacement for Saibari, not nearly as versatile as the Moroccan – who can play anywhere in the attacking-third – not as spectacular and not as likely to score crucial goals.

VILLARREAL

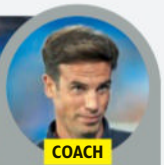
Stable but with a new coaching twist

La Liga bronze medallists last term, the Yellow Submarine, about to undertake a sixth tour of duty in the European elite, have one overriding mission this season: a quest for respectability following their disastrous showing last term when they finished second-from-bottom in the league phase, picking up just one point from a possible 24. Abject, hapless and demoralised, their seven defeats in the last edition – including shock losses to Pafos of Cyprus and FC Copenhagen – was a humiliating exercise for a supposed La Liga top gun and they will be itching to put the record straight. A new broom has been sweeping of late at the Estadio de la Ceramica, with Inigo Perez, a Conference League runner-up last season at the Rayo Vallecano controls, taking over as coach from Marcelino, who last campaign became the first coach in Villarreal history to secure Champions League qualification in consecutive seasons.

Dangerman... Tajon Buchanan

To what extent does Inigo Perez represent a style of play sea-change?

While predecessor Marcelino essentially swore by a meticulously organised counter-attacking side, Inigo's *modus operandi* is much more intense and direct, very similar in its organised chaos to the philosophy of Marcelo Bielsa. Press high, force the error and swoop.



COACH
Inigo Perez
A coach renowned for his clever use of analytics and video sessions is a most able communicator.

KEY MAN
Gerard Moreno
Evergreen striker still going strong at the age of 34. Twice the top-scoring Spaniard in La Liga.

YOUNGSTER
Carlos Macia
Aged just 18, the midfield controller is already being compared to *La Roja* captain Rodri. Watched by many top European clubs.

Of this season's UCL teams, Villarreal have been one of the most frugal spenders. Wisdom or folly?

After spending a huge amount on reinforcements in the past two off-seasons – €174m to be precise – the club sensibly opted to play the frugality card this summer, making just one major signing in the form of €15m Canada midfielder Nathan Saliba, who joined from Anderlecht. Villarreal are happy with their squad and saw no point in making change for change's sake.

What is the state of play in the goalkeeping pecking order?

After failing to convince on a number of occasions last season, Brazilian keeper Luiz Junior is under pressure to retain the first-choice slot. The experienced Hungarian Peter Gulacsi, acquired from RB Leipzig this summer for a snip at €1.5m, has much Champions League experience and could well win this duel.

LENS

Hoping to prove last season was no fluke

After one of their best-ever seasons in 2025-26 – securing the Ligue 1 runners-up spot behind PSG and beating Nice in the French Cup final – the Lensois camp had every reason to be cock-a-hoop. Then the hammer blow: the news that hugely influential coach Pierre Sage, only in situ for 12 months, had agreed to move to Crystal Palace. What should have been a solid platform for more success at the Stade Bollaert, now has ushered in uncertainty aplenty. The new captain of the ship, the German boss Dino Toppmoller, was previously an assistant to Julian Nagelsmann at RB Leipzig and Bayern Munich and head coach at Eintracht Frankfurt.

Renaissance... Florian Thauvin

Have Lens adequately replaced Malian midfield star Mamadou Sangare, who left for Brentford?
Sangare, a standout performer in Ligue 1 last term, will be a tremendously difficult act to follow. Lens are banking on the Algeria international Yacine Titraoui to fill the gap, though the pair are rather dissimilar in playing style – Sangare is a box-to-box beast, while Titraoui is a metronome of a ball-distributor.

How important is 33-year-old winger Florian Thauvin to the effectiveness of Lens' attacking system?
Last term, Thauvin's first season in red and gold, was a triumph in every way: in terms of raw numbers (14 goals and ten assists), his technical and tactical influence, and exemplary leadership as skipper. So impressive was his form that he was called back up to the France squad for the first time in six years.

COACH
Dino Toppmoller
Aiming to improve on his poor UCL showing last season with Eintracht – just one win and six losses.

KEY MAN
Matthieu Udol
Left-sided piston, one of the best passers of the ball in France. Has recovered from four ACL injuries.

YOUNGSTER
Robin Risser
The 21-year-old GK's form last season saw him go to the World Cup with France.

SLAVIA PRAGUE

Czech champs aim to avoid "check" out

The Czech champions, who clinched their ninth national league title just a few months ago, will be eager to avoid the Champions League disaster of last season when they "checked" out after finishing third-from-bottom in the league phase, failing to win a single match and losing five times, including defeats to Inter, Arsenal, Pafos, Barcelona and Tottenham Hotspur. Any improvement on that series of calamities would be a major act of redemption, and what a momentous turn of events a three-point haul would be, coming 19 years after their last victory in this competition: a 2-1 home win over Steaua Bucharest in September 2007.

New line-leader ...Mojmir Chytil

Could Slavia be affected by a post-World Cup blues?
With no fewer than nine of their players in the Czech Republic squad that so markedly under-performed at the World Cup, the hangover easily could spill into life at club level. Team leaders such as attacking midfielder Lukas Provod and skipper Tomas Holes must do their best to keep everyone focused.

Why is giant striker Tomas Chory, the leading goalscorer in the Czech league in 2025-26, only a back-up?
Repeated acts of indiscipline on the pitch and a number suspensions have whittled away at his standing at the club, with president Jaroslav Tvrdik even saying last spring he'd never play for the club again. A reconciliation and reintegration is underway, but in the meantime Mojmir Chytil has taken over as the leader of the line, and very successfully too.

COACH
Jindrich Trpisovsky
Has led Slavia to five league titles during his eight-and-a-half years in charge.

KEY MAN
Stepan Chaloupek
Solid and composed centre-back who is the backline fulcrum.

YOUNGSTER
Wiktor Nowak
Forceful ball-carrier and ice-cool finisher. Polish U21 midfielder.

STUTTGART

Miracle men to over-perform again?

No wonder Sebastian Hoeness has a host of top European clubs licking their lips. In just over three years in charge of Stuttgart, he has made the extraordinary a regular occurrence, immediately plotting a remarkable escape from the relegation mire, twice qualifying the Swabians for the Champions League and overseeing a DFB-Pokal triumph in 2024-25. A quite exceptional set of achievements at a club which, in recent times, has had a cardinal rule of always recording positive numbers in their net transfer dealings. On more than one occasion, Hoeness has expressed his irritation with the fiscal hawks, whose standard reply is that they seek quality rather than action for its own sake.

Natural finisher ...Deniz Undav

Is Atakan Karazor in danger of losing his place in the starting line-up?
After losing the VfB captaincy, Karazor probably will have to play second-fiddle to the former Union Berlin man Grischa Promel, brought in this summer from Hoffenheim. Industrious, dynamic and a decent goalscorer, Promel simply offers more and is a born-leader as well.

Who will take over in goal from Alexander Nubel, whose two-year loan spell from Bayern elapsed?
The initial plan was for homegrown prospect Dennis Seimen – so impressive last campaign as a loanee at second-tier promotion-winners Paderborn – to inherit. But with Seimen badly injuring a hamstring in pre-season and not due back until October, the experienced Fabian Bredlow will step in, with Marius Funk, snapped up from Energie Cottbus, an able deputy.

COACH
Sebastian Hoeness
Very highly-rated young manager, the son of Dieter and nephew to Uli.

KEY MAN
Deniz Undav
The new VfB skipper scored three goals at the 2026 World Cup.

YOUNGSTER
Dzenan Pejcinovic
Germany Under-21 striker signed from Wolfsburg for €25m.

The Outsiders

CLUB BRUGGE

Regularly punching above their weight

The Flemish giants now sport a second star on their shirts following the club's conquest of a 20th Belgian league title in May. Not that the 2025-26 campaign was all plain sailing for the Blue-and-Blacks, whose chronic inconsistency in the opening four months of the season led to the December sacking of coach Nicky Hayen and the reinstatement of Croat Ivan Leko, back for a second spell in the Venice of the North. Amazing what a return to old values can do. In no time at all, Club were flying again, squeezing the life out of the opposition with their speed, directness and purpose in opposition territory. Leko's side also managed to scramble into the play-offs for the Champions League knockout rounds, finally seen off by Atletico Madrid. Club have, much to the dismay of their supporters, lost a great deal of ability in the summer months, not least Arsenal-bound Greek winger Christos Tzolis – so impressive in the Belgian league play-offs – and the defensive midfield duo of Raphael Onyedika, now with Eintracht Frankfurt, and Aleksandar Stankovic, reacquired by Inter.

No pushovers ...Club Brugge

Is the club's reputation as Champions League pushovers unfounded or not?
The facts say no. Last season, for example, they thumped Monaco and Marseille 4-1 and 3-0 respectively and held Barcelona to a 3-3 draw in Brugge. In 2022-23, they reached the last 16, beating Porto, Leverkusen and Atletico in their group.

COACH
Ivan Leko
The former Croatia midfielder proved a huge success in his role as Club saviour last term, achieving 2.45 points per game.

KEY MAN
Hans Vanaken
Club's long-serving midfielder and skipper is quietly efficient, accumulating goals and assists every single season.

YOUNGSTER
Lee Han-beom
South Korea centre-back, snapped up from Danish outfit Midtjylland, for whom he headed the winner in the country's cup final last spring.

Which Club Brugge player has improved the most under Leko?
Hugo Vetlesen, the Belgium-born Norway midfielder, emerged from the fringes of the first team to play an instrumental part in Club's triumph in the domestic championship play-offs. Probably their most dynamic ball-carrier, quick to break the lines and an underrated marksman.

Have Club got the balance right between selling on players for big bucks and discovering a steady stream of talent at reasonable prices?
Belgian champions in seven of the last 11 seasons and Champions League participants eight times over the same period, Club have very much made that formula their own. This summer, they pulled in around €80m in sales and spent just over half that on newcomers such as Spanish left-winger Jan Virgili and defensive midfielder Freddie Potts.

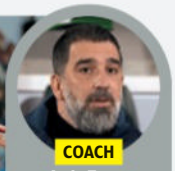
SHAKHTAR DONETSK

A temporary home for Turan's talented charges

Everyone connected with the reigning Ukrainian champions is tingling with excitement at the prospect of the club's Turkish coach Arda Turan going about his demonstrative business in the Champions League this term. Arda, who in his playing days caught the eye with his dazzling ball skills for Galatasaray, Atletico Madrid and Barcelona, usually was fuelled by enthusiasm, and now brings the same passion to his work as a coach. Whether urging on his charges on the touchline or joining in the goal celebrations, he is anything but the semi-detached sort, living and breathing every single kick and clearly successful in fostering a "one for all, all for one" spirit in the group. Last season, Arda's first in charge of the Miners, proved an immensely satisfying one for him, overseeing an emphatic triumph in the league and steering them to the last four of the Conference League, where they lost 5-2 on aggregate to eventual winners Crystal Palace in the semi-finals. The one blot on the copybook? The failure to reach the league phase of the Europa League, beaten on penalties by Panathinaikos in the qualifying rounds.

Team spirit... "one for all, all for one"

What would Shakhtar regard as a successful UCL campaign?
Arda has suggested that a realistic goal would be to end up in the top 24 of the league phase, a result which would at least give them a shot in the play-offs. It's a tall order for a team without a home ground, but Arda believes that the 20 European games they played last term will stand them in good stead.



COACH
Arda Turan
Last season, he became the first Turkish boss to win a league title in another European country.

KEY MAN
Oleh Ocheretko
Fast-improving attacking midfielder. Top left foot, great at set-pieces and often ghosts undetected into the red zone.

YOUNGSTER
Vinicius Tobias
Brazilian right-back renowned for his athleticism and powers of recovery. Once on the books of Real Madrid.

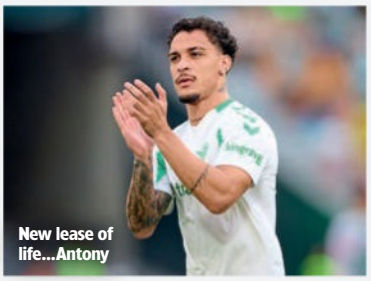
Where will they play their home ties?
With UEFA inevitably ruling out fixtures in war-torn Ukraine, Shakhtar needed a back-up plan. After negotiations with reported venues in Germany and London, Chelsea's Stamford Bridge eventually won the race to lay out the red carpet.

Which of Shakhtar's new boys will make the most positive impact?
Venezuela left-winger Gleiker Mendoza, bought from fellow Ukraine side Kryvbas, has the X-Factor: bags of pace, virtuosity and a cannonball of a shot. The 24-year-old was voted the league's MVP for 2025-26 and must use the Champions League platform for wider recognition.

REAL BETIS

Second-timers pose a threat

Fifth in La Liga last season, Betis have only played in the Champions League once before, not going beyond the group phase in 2005-06, yet plainly relishing English opposition, winning at home to Chelsea and holding Liverpool to a goalless draw at Anfield. Well into his 70s, head coach Manuel Pellegrini still has much to bring to the top-level game, wily in thought and deed, a clever man-manager and always keen to slot in as many attacking types as he possibly can. New recruits include the Republic of Ireland striker Troy Parrott – bought for €16m from Dutch outfit AZ – and Uruguayan defensive midfielder Facundo Bernal (ex-Fluminense).



New lease of life...Antony

With Sergi Altimira joining Sporting and Sofyan Amrabat's loan deal ending, who will anchor the midfield?
The pair unquestionably will be missed, though at least the gritty Catalan Marc Roca remains to guard the backline.

COACH
Manuel Pellegrini
Experienced Chilean who's managed clubs in his homeland, Spain, England, Argentina, China and Ecuador.

KEY MAN
Pablo Fornals
Underrated midfield all-rounder. Scored the goal that stamped Betis' UCL ticket.

YOUNGSTER
Jose Antonio Morante
Left-footed winger who made his bow in a Europa League tie v PAOK early this year.

It's early days for Facundo Bernal at the Sanchez-Pizjuan, but he impressed in pre-season and early on in La Liga, covering lots of ground and catching the eye with his ball-winning and accurate passing.

After missing much of last season with a broken fibula and ankle injury, what can we expect from golden oldie playmaker Isco?
The 34-year-old club captain seems to have made a good recovery and is likely to be used in short, sharp bursts in the early stages of the new campaign. Manuel Pellegrini says he intends to deploy him for 30 minutes per game as chief game-changing substitute.

FEYENOORD

Van Bronckhorst return to spark upturn?

Some much-needed context is needed when examining the Rotterdammers' final classification of second place in the Eredivisie last season. Dig deeper into the numbers and you will find that the Feyenoord Class of 2025-26 is now tied with Willem II as the worst runners-up in the history of the Dutch top flight, only averaging 1.91 points per game. In matches against the Netherlands' top five, the defensively susceptible Feyenoord proved particularly poor last term, failing to win a single fixture. Following an end-of-season performance review, head coach Robin van Persie was duly sacked, making way for the return of Giovanni van Bronckhorst.

Top talents... Zechiel and Valente

Why should Feyenoord fans be optimistic about the new campaign?
In most of their pre-season matches, and in the early stages of the Eredivisie campaign (three wins and two draws), they have looked far better collectively

COACH
Giovanni van Bronckhorst
A Feyenoord legend. Ex-midfielder who coached them to the Dutch title in 2026-17.

KEY MAN
Luciano Valente
Imaginative No.10, unfortunate to miss out on the World Cup.

YOUNGSTER
Gjivai Zechiel
Dynamic box-to-box star. Brilliant prospect.

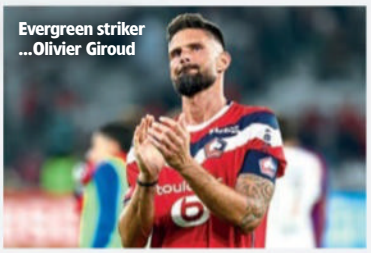
than last season, with greater substance to their play and infinitely more balance. Up-and-coming new signings such as Spanish striker Nacho Ferri (ex-Westerlo), winger Reiss Nelson (Arsenal) and German keeper Tjark Ernst (Hertha Berlin) are all exciting acquisitions.

Which of the young brigade are worth looking out for?
Robin van Persie's son, Shaqueel, 19, most definitely is a chip off the old block, a forward with a very bright future. Another quality teenager is attacking midfielder Tobias van den Elshout, who made his senior debut for the club early this year.

LILLE

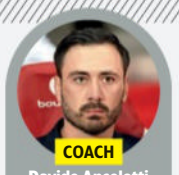
Ancelotti Jr. a chip off the old block?

The Lillois will be guided and organised by an Ancelotti this campaign. Not the venerable Carlo, the architect of a record five Champions League titles, but his son Davide, who rather surprisingly received the LOSC call when previous incumbent Bruno Genesio walked away, eventually ending up at Marseille. Lille, third in the French league standings last season, have taken a calculated risk with Ancelotti Jr. Only once has he served as a head coach, a short five-month spell in charge at Rio giants Flamengo in 2025. In fairness to the 37-year-old, he has worked extensively alongside his father, almost a decade of soaking up all that experience.



Evergreen striker ...Olivier Giroud

Soon to celebrate his 40th birthday, for how much longer can ex-France striker Olivier Giroud keep going?
Giroud, now in his 22nd season of pro football, opted this summer to sign on for another campaign, and clearly still has the competitive flame burning inside



COACH
Davide Ancelotti
Promising coach ready to walk in his father's footsteps.

KEY MAN
Berke Ozer
The Turkey keeper has proven himself a fine replacement for Lucas Chevalier.

YOUNGSTER
Basar Onal
Pulled off a coup by signing this fearless left-winger from NEC.

of him. He tends to be used somewhat sparingly these days, though remains a menace thanks to his physicality and decoy smarts. Eleven goals last term.

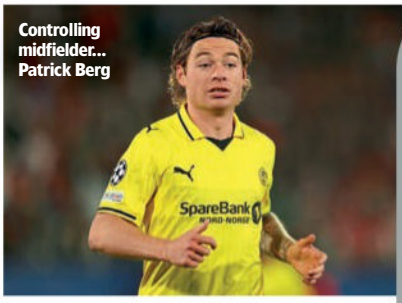
What should be the No.1 item on Ancelotti's Lille agenda?
First and foremost to vastly improve the team's offensive end product. Last term, Lille managed just 52 goals in Ligue 1, making them the least prolific side in the top eight. In the second half of the campaign, they were especially listless, on the scoresheet just 19 times. Japan striker Ayase Ueda, a summer arrival from Feyenoord and top scorer in the Eredivisie last season, should help.

Play-Off Qualifiers

BODO/GLIMT

Ready for another fairy-tale run

The Northern Lights continue to glow at the small-town club close to the Artic Circle who, since 2020, have been on a thrilling success spree, with four domestic league titles under their belt and a record of over-achievement in Europe. Among the last eight in the 2021-22 Conference League and Europa League semi-finalists in 2024-25, the men in yellow are now breathing fire in the Champions League, excelling en route to the knockout phase last season and making the cut again this term, their passage secured by victories against the Belgians of Union Saint-Gilloise and Dutch side NEC. The list of the giants they have slain in European competition – Roma, Celtic, Porto, Olympiacos, Lazio, Manchester City and Atletico Madrid – tells a compelling tale of success against the odds. Fortitude, fearlessness and far-sighted gameplans come as standard, though they have had their off-days in Europe, not least when succumbing six months ago to a 5-0 last-16 hammering at the hands of Portuguese outfit Sporting, a result which turned a three-goal first-leg advantage into a crushing exit.



Controlling midfielder... Patrick Berg

Would they be as competitive without the advantage of hosting opponents on an artificial pitch in the bitter cold?
Synthetic pitches are extremely rare at the top level in Europe and visitors to the far north undoubtedly find it difficult to adapt to such conditions, unsure of the bounce and slow to turn. Not that Bodo/Glimt only thrive on plastic. Last season they beat Inter home and away.

Coach Kjetil Knutsen has been linked with countless overseas clubs. Why has he never left Bodo/Glimt?
The long and short of it is that he remains totally invested in the Bodo/Glimt project. Eight years in the job and still obsessed with every aspect of leading the Yellows. He clearly does not see the grass as greener elsewhere.

What are the key facets of Knutsen's coaching philosophy?
His side are so hard to deal with out of possession, either packing the central areas with numbers in a low block or laying traps further upfield, swarming an opponent who delays a pass or is not comfortable on the ball. Attack-wise, they love to dominate with a short-passing style, much of the groundwork originating from the roaming pair of No.8s.

COACH
Kjetil Knutsen
Three-time Norwegian Coach of the Year, whose first Europe-wide statement was Bodo's 6-1 win over Jose Mourinho's Roma in the 2021-22 Conference League.

KEY MAN
Patrick Berg
The Norway ace is a top-class midfielder. Mysteriously made little impact in a spell in France with Lens.

YOUNGSTER
Sondre Auklend
Gutsy, energetic midfielder with plenty of technical ability and a knack for arriving late and undetected in the box.

FENERBAHCE

Back after nearly two decades in the wilderness

Their backs against the wall after being held 1-1 at home by Lyon in the first leg of the play-offs, Fenerbahce magnificently rose to the occasion in the return tie in France, a deserved 2-1 win qualifying the Yellow Canaries for their first piece of Champions League action in 19 long years. A massive relief for all connected to the Istanbul outfit, who for the best part of two decades found continental prime time a bridge too far, either falling short in qualification rounds on no fewer than 11 occasions or twice the subject of UEFA bans. Fortunately for them, the long wait is over. "This is a substantial victory for our club's prestige," declared coach Ismail Kartal. The Fenerbahce bean-counters will see the renewal of their Champions League vows as total vindication of an aggressive and expensive recruitment programme this summer, the acquisitions including Belgium striker Romelu Lukaku (ex-Napoli), English attacker Mason Greenwood (a €39m signing from Marseille), Netherlands defender Nathan Ake (Manchester City) and Kosovo No.9 Vedat Muriqi (Mallorca).

New signing... Romelu Lukaku

Coach Kartal has had to endure much criticism from fans. How did he react to Champions League qualification?
After the win in Lyon, he spent part of his post-match press conference taking fans to task for resorting to "hate campaigns". "Real Fenerbahce fans get behind the club, the trainer, the president and the players. Soon I'll reveal the names of those who are proper Fenerbahce fans and those who are not."

What's the squad's great strength?
From top to bottom, this is a group flowing with elite-level experience: the likes of France workhorse N'Golo Kante, Brazil keeper Ederson, bustling Belgium striker Lukaku, former Internazionale and PSG centre-back Milan Skriniar and volcanic engine-room warrior Matteo Guendouzi.

Has the summer spending spree led to any key departures?
The most keenly felt exit is likely to be that of Brazilian attacking midfielder Anderson Talisca, who after playing a key role in Fener's Champions League qualification – scoring four times – left for Emirati outfit Al Jazira in September.

COACH
Ismail Kartal
A Fenerbahce man from head to toe, player for a decade and now in his fourth stint as head coach.

KEY MAN
Ederson
Once a vital piece of Manchester City's all-conquering ensemble, the Brazil keeper has the responsibility of overseeing Fener's defensive operation.

YOUNGSTER
Archie Brown
Ever-enterprising Birmingham-born left-back previously at West Brom, Derby, Lausanne and Gent.

VIKING

Norwegians making their UCL bow

These are wonderful times for the Stavanger club, who after securing their first Norwegian league title in 34 years last term – pipping Bodo/Glimt to the gold medal in a thrilling finale – are excitedly preparing for their inaugural Champions League campaign, just reward for upsetting favourites Dinamo Zagreb at the final qualification hurdle. Full credit to the writers of the Viking success story, joint-managers Bjarte Lunde Aarsheim and Morten Jensen, in tandem at the club since 2021. A significant claim to fame here is a 5-4 aggregate victory over a Chelsea side featuring Frank Lampard and John Terry in the first round of the UEFA Cup in

UCL debutants ...Viking

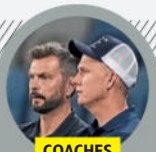
2002-03. With upcoming fixtures against Bayern Munich, Aston Villa, Atletico Madrid and Napoli, could Viking repeat those exploits?

What must opponents of Viking avoid at all costs?

Giving away penalties. Last season in the Norwegian top flight, they were awarded no fewer than 14 spot-kicks, of which all bar one were converted. Skipper and winger Zlatko Tripic was the man they usually turned to in such situations, netting nine times out of nine.

Who is Viking's main plunderer of chances?

In-form Danish centre-forward Peter Christiansen, who contributed 14 goals to their Eliteserien triumph in 2025, is in his element looking for opportunities in the penalty box, invariably to be found adjacent to the ball. Right foot, left foot or head – it makes no difference.



COACHES
Bjarte Lunde Aarsheim & Morten Jensen
Aarsheim takes care of matchday decisions, Jensen deals with player development and opponent analysis.

KEY MAN
Henrik Falchener
The 23-year-old Norway centre-back plays with maturity.

YOUNGSTER
Tobias Moi
Industrious and technical Norway U21 defensive midfielder.

SABAH

Debutants and an unknown quantity

Known as the Owls, the club from the town of Masazir – located some 20 miles north-west of the Azerbaijan capital Baku – only have been in existence for nine years. But what an impact they have made in such a short period, claiming their first-ever domestic league title last spring, adding the national cup for a well-deserved double and then sealing Champions League qualification – another first for an outfit clearly in a hurry to impose themselves. Sabah, coached by the Lithuanian Valdas Dambrauskas, are only the second Azerbaijani club to have participated in the Champions League. Once omnipotent in these parts, Qarabag were the original trailblazers in 2017-18.

Rwanda striker... Joy-Lance Mickels

Why should Sabah be respected?

Coach Dambrauskas has instilled a "fight till you drop" mentality in the ranks and this positivity was there for all to see when Sabah saw off Danes AGF – overcoming a first-leg deficit – and then the Israelis of Hapoel Be'er Sheva in the final qualifying tie, only staying alive in the second leg thanks to a 94th-minute goal before finally swotting the opposition aside in extra-time.

Who in the squad has the most European experience?

The German-born Rwanda national team striker Joy-Lance Mickels has done the rounds in Deutschland, good enough to attend the Borussia Monchengladbach academy, play for Schalke's reserves and was also under contract at Carl Zeiss Jena in eastern Germany and Dutch club MMV Maastricht before joining Sabah.

COACH
Valdas Dambrauskas
Self-starter who began his career in the lower echelons of the English game.

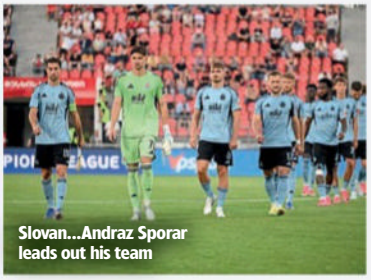
KEY MAN
Veljko Simic
Serbian winger, good creator and finisher.

YOUNGSTER
Christian Nwachukwu
Rapid Nigerian winger once on the books of Sheffield United.

SLOVAN BRATISLAVA

Yaya Toure at the controls

Slovakian champions on 16 occasions since independence in 1993, Slovan are far and away the dominant football force in the country, and back in 1968-69 even managed to claim a European trophy, beating Barcelona 3-2 in the final of the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup. Over the next few months, all eyes will be trained on new Slovan coach Yaya Toure who, within two months of his appointment, guided the Sky Blues to only their second Champions League appearance. Toure, the first African to lead a team at this level, does not have a high bar to clear. In their previous Champions League outing in 2024-25, Slovan lost all eight of their fixtures.



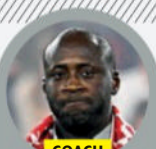
Slovan...Andraz Sporar leads out his team

Is there a more appealing Champions League narrative than that of Slovan winger Manasse Kianga?

The tale of Kianga, 24, who holds South African and English citizenship, is one to warm the heart, an incredible journey which took him from the ninth tier of the game in England – where he was a sensation for Rossington Main in Doncaster in South Yorkshire – to Slovan and the Champions League via Slovak third-division side Lokomotiva Kosice.

In their one previous UCL swing in 2024-25, Slovan conceded 27 goals. Can they avoid a similar deluge?

Slovak insiders suggest that the Slovan backline has improved immeasurably, now built around the robust Slovenian-Serb centre-back pairing of Kenan Bajric and Svetozar Markovic. Two Panamanians, right-back Cesar Blackman and midfield holder Cristian Martinez, add steel too.



COACH
Yaya Toure
Four-time African Footballer of the Year and a UCL winner with Barca in 2008-09.

KEY MAN
Suleiman Camara
Lively Gambia left-winger, who poses a major goal threat.

YOUNGSTER
Artur Gajdos
Attacking midfielder, 22, blessed with ball control and creativity.

Play-Off Qualifiers

AEK ATHENS

Greek champions full of goals

Restored to the European top table after an absence of eight years, the Greek champions have made up much lost ground in the past 12 months, making the sort of recovery no one in Greek Super League circles thought possible when the Yellow-Blacks lost all six of their games in the 2024-25 Hellenic championship play-off rounds. Under new boss Marko Nikolic – who took over from Argentine coach Matias Almeyda in the summer of 2025 – AEK were the essence of dominance last season, cruising to the title on the back of a 22-match unbeaten run, a period of invincibility which stretched from October to May. It remains to be seen whether the Athenians have sufficient wherewithal to hold their own against the great and the good of European football. Not once have they reached the knockout stages of the Champions League, and they had their ups and downs in progressing to the last eight of the Conference League last term, extremely poor in a home draw with Shamrock Rovers, but impressively winning 1-0 at Fiorentina and only losing to Rayo Vallecano by the narrowest of margins in the quarter-finals.

Greek champions ...AEK Athens

In which department are AEK particularly well-endowed?
They are full of goals at the point of attack, where the Serbia international Luka Jovic and Hungary No.9 Barnabas Varga have developed a fine chemistry. The 28-year-old Jovic, previously on the books of Eintracht Frankfurt, Real Madrid, Fiorentina and Milan, hit 21 goals in all competitions last season.

Where now for AEK following the return to his homeland of Mexico midfield ace Orbelin Pineda?
Many AEK fans remain mystified that Pineda, one of the most popular players at the Agia Sophia Stadium, was allowed to depart with the Champions League on the horizon. The Greek league's Player of the Season for 2025-26, his crystalline technique, vision and dynamism will be badly missed.

Can Croatia playmaker Lovro Majer, signed from Wolfsburg, fill the void?
The fact that Wolfsburg bought Majer for €25m from French side Rennes in 2023 and sold him for just €6m three years later speaks volumes on how his stock has dropped. Majer, capped over 30 times by Croatia, clearly has talent, and perhaps a move to new surroundings will help him rediscover his form of old.

COACH
Marko Nikolic
In his first 12 months behind the wheel at AEK, the Serb has exceeded all expectations. He has won league titles in Serbia (Partizan), Hungary (Videoton) and now Greece.

KEY MAN
Luka Jovic
Natural-born penalty area opportunist, who racked up ten goals for Eintracht Frankfurt in the 2018-19 Europa League.

YOUNGSTER
Christos Alexiou
A tall, combative and ultra-reliable centre-back, 21, on loan from Inter.

LASK

Celtic's conquerors eyeing more upsets

They certainly believe in miracles at the Linz-based Austrian champions. And why wouldn't they after they sensationally turned the tables on Celtic in the final do-or-die qualification duel, sealing their first-ever Champions League spot with a second-leg fightback for the ages, going from four goals in arrears early in the return fixture to 5-4 aggregate winners. As LASK coach Didi Kuhbauer succinctly put it: "Our heart, our love and our passion were unbelievable." In contrast to Austrian big-hitters such as Rapid Vienna, Austria Vienna and Red Bull Salzburg, the Linzer are small-fry, with only two domestic league titles to their name in 127 years of existence and in the third tier of the national pyramid as recently as 2014. But how they have grown in the last few years, unveiling a new stadium in 2023 – the 19,000-capacity Raiffeisen Arena – claiming their first-ever league-cup double last term and now established as the club with the fourth-largest budget in Austrian football. An €18.6m windfall for just reaching the Champions League will have the top brass beaming.

Miracle comeback...LASK celebrate after the Celtic victory

In pre-season, several pundits were suggesting that LASK lacked a genuine goalscoring threat. Justified?
Not at all. Both their twin-strikers, the American Samuel Adeniran and the Nigerian Moses Usor – now back in the saddle after a meniscus tear – can finish with the best. LASK brought in another frontman this summer in Frenchman Ramiz Harakate (ex-Grazer AK), only to see him immediately suffer an ACL injury.

How much of a setback was the sale of young centre-back Modou Keba Cisse to Aston Villa?
While Cisse, 21, is an exceptional prospect, LASK feel they can live with his absence. Expect young Dutchman Xavier Mbuyamba to fill the gap admirably. The 24-year-old, acquired from Volendam at the start of the year, was once on the books of both Barcelona and Chelsea's academies.

Can LASK cope with the workload of European and domestic commitments?
In a two-game per week schedule, it will be a stretch. Straight after their miraculous come-from-behind Champions League victory over Celtic, coach Kuhbauer made it crystal-clear that he needed more players. "Our squad is strong but small," he declared.

COACH
Didi Kuhbauer
Ex-Austria midfielder who played at club level for Wolfsburg and Real Sociedad. This is his second stint as LASK boss.

KEY MAN
Sascha Horvath
Diminutive playmaker with bags of vision, inventiveness and personality. The LASK captain is Viennese with Hungarian roots.

YOUNGSTER
Lukas Jungwirth
Excellent 22-year-old goalkeeper, tall, commanding and a great shot-stopper.

All teams compiled by Nick Bidwell

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE: 2026-27 FIXTURES

Tuesday, October 13
Lens v Sporting *(5.45pm)*
Sabah v Slavia Prague *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Lille *(8pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Manchester United *(8pm)*
Galatasaray v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Club Brugge *(8pm)*
RB Leipzig v PSV *(8pm)*
Viking v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
Villarreal v Napoli *(8pm)*

Wednesday, October 14
Feyenoord v Como *(5.45pm)*
LASK v Liverpool *(5.45pm)*
Aston Villa v Fenerbahce *(8pm)*
Bodo/Glimt v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Manchester City v PSG *(8pm)*
Real Betis v Porto *(8pm)*
Roma v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Shakhtar Donetsk v AEK Athens *(8pm)*
Slovan Bratislava v Stuttgart *(8pm)*

Tuesday, October 20
Fenerbahce v Slavia Prague *(5.45pm)*
Sabah v Borussia Dortmund *(5.45pm)*
Liverpool v Villarreal *(8pm)*
Manchester City v AEK Athens *(8pm)*
Napoli v Bodo/Glimt *(8pm)*
Porto v PSV *(8pm)*
PSG v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Roma v Slovan Bratislava *(8pm)*
Stuttgart v Atletico Madrid *(8pm)*

Wednesday, October 21
Como v Manchester United *(5.45pm)*
Lille v Galatasaray *(5.45pm)*
Aston Villa v Viking *(8pm)*
Bayern Munich v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Lens *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Shakhtar Donetsk *(8pm)*
Real Betis v Feyenoord *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v RB Leipzig *(8pm)*
Sporting v LASK *(8pm)*

Tuesday, November 3
Galatasaray v Stuttgart *(5.45pm)*
Shakhtar Donetsk v Sporting *(5.45pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
Barcelona v Aston Villa *(8pm)*
Bodo/Glimt v Lille *(8pm)*
Feyenoord v Internazionale *(8pm)*
LASK v Slovan Bratislava *(8pm)*
Manchester United v Roma *(8pm)*
Villarreal v PSG *(8pm)*

Wednesday, November 4
AEK Athens v Real Madrid *(5.45pm)*
Fenerbahce v Liverpool *(5.45pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Real Betis *(8pm)*
Lens v Como *(8pm)*
Porto v Napoli *(8pm)*
PSV v Club Brugge *(8pm)*
RB Leipzig v Manchester City *(8pm)*
Slavia Prague v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Viking v Sabah *(8pm)*

Tuesday, November 24
Bodo/Glimt v LASK *(5.45pm)*
Galatasaray v Aston Villa *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Como v AEK Athens *(8pm)*
Feyenoord v Porto *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Napoli *(8pm)*
RB Leipzig v Lens *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v PSV *(8pm)*
Slovan Bratislava v Real Betis *(8pm)*

Wednesday, November 25
Sabah v Barcelona *(5.45pm)*
Slavia Prague v Villarreal *(5.45pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Viking *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Stuttgart *(8pm)*
Lille v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
PSG v Roma *(8pm)*
Shakhtar Donetsk v Fenerbahce *(8pm)*
Sporting v Manchester United *(8pm)*

Tuesday, December 8
Viking v Feyenoord *(5.45pm)*
Villarreal v Sabah *(5.45pm)*
AEK Athens v Galatasaray *(8pm)*
Aston Villa v PSG *(8pm)*
Barcelona v Manchester City *(8pm)*
Bayern Munich v Slavia Prague *(8pm)*
Manchester United v RB Leipzig *(8pm)*
Napoli v Club Brugge *(8pm)*
Roma v Sporting *(8pm)*

Wednesday, December 9
Real Betis v Como *(5.45pm)*
Slovan Bratislava v Shakhtar Donetsk *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Internazionale *(8pm)*
LASK v Fenerbahce *(8pm)*
Lens v Bodo/Glimt *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Porto *(8pm)*
PSV v Atletico Madrid *(8pm)*
Stuttgart v Lille *(8pm)*

Tuesday, January 19
Bodo/Glimt v Atletico Madrid *(5.45pm)*
Galatasaray v Feyenoord *(5.45pm)*
AEK Athens v Roma *(8pm)*
Aston Villa v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Lille v Slovan Bratislava *(8pm)*
Porto v Slavia Prague *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v LASK *(8pm)*
Stuttgart v Club Brugge *(8pm)*

Wednesday, January 20
Fenerbahce v Villarreal *(5.45pm)*
Sabah v Napoli *(5.45pm)*
Como v PSG *(8pm)*
Lens v Manchester City *(8pm)*
Manchester United v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
RB Leipzig v Shakhtar Donetsk *(8pm)*
Real Betis v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Sporting v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Viking v PSV *(8pm)*

Wednesday, January 27
Arsenal v Sabah *(8pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Fenerbahce *(8pm)*
Barcelona v Como *(8pm)*
Bayern Munich v Real Betis *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v AEK Athens *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Bodo/Glimt *(8pm)*
Feyenoord v RB Leipzig *(8pm)*
LASK v Porto *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Lens *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Sporting *(8pm)*
Napoli v Viking *(8pm)*
PSG v Galatasaray *(8pm)*
PSV v Stuttgart *(8pm)*
Roma v Lille *(8pm)*
Shakhtar Donetsk v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Slavia Prague v Aston Villa *(8pm)*
Slovan Bratislava v Internazionale *(8pm)*
Villarreal v Manchester United *(8pm)*

Kick-off times are UK. Fixtures are subject to change

Metropolitano...Madrid last hosted the Champions League final in 2019

Europa League preview

Nick Bidwell assesses the runners and riders in this year's Europa League

Italian giants... Juventus and Milan headline this year's Europa League

So much for the assertion that the Europa League is a shelter for the second rate; this season's guest list is jam-packed with some of the most prestigious names in continental football, a royal collective made up of Milan, Juventus, Benfica, Anderlecht, Marseille, Olympiacos and Celtic.

All winners of major European cups, all boasting massive fanbases and all dreaming – some justifiably, others not – of another close encounter with glory.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the experience scale, sit the uncharted territory crew, teams unfamiliar with this level of UEFA competition.

For the likes of Ararat-Armenia, shock Portuguese Cup winners Torreense and the Premier League fairy-tale boys of Bournemouth, this is the first step of a great adventure, while OFI of Greece, Norway's Lillestrom and English top-flight outfit Sunderland will experience a group/league phase for the first time.

FAVOURITES

With 15 major European titles between them, the Italian giants of **Juventus** and **Milan** will be expected to go all the way – although both will see their domestic championship as their main priority after the ignominy of finishing outside the Serie A top four last term. Provided the Old Lady and *Rossoneri* rotate wisely, there is no reason why they cannot make a sustained Europa League challenge and, as they know only too well, first place in this particular marathon puts them straight back in the Champions League.

Conference League winners...Crystal Palace are chasing more silverware

The Europa League semi-finals have featured two Premier League sides in each of the past two campaigns and that trend could easily continue. Their appetite whetted by victory in the Conference League last term, **Crystal Palace** will be keen for more of those midweek thrills, while Euro neophytes **Bournemouth** are sure to hit the ground running in their first-ever European odyssey. In the eyes of both the Eagles and the Cherries, the Europa League represents the sort of convenient route to silverware that simply cannot be ignored.

With Spanish clubs accounting for nine of the last 17 Europa League titles, they should certainly be in the conversation too. **Celta Vigo**, back in the Europa League for the first time since reaching the semi-finals in 2016-17, are a youthful, well-organised and purposeful outfit, while **Real Sociedad** will be pinning much of their hopes on the redoubtable frontline pairing of captain and Spanish World Cup hero Mikel Oyarzabal with his Icelandic sidekick Orri Oskarsson.

IN CONTENTION

ABOVE: European return...Sunderland haven't played continental football since 1973-74

RIGHT: Benfica talisman...Greek striker Vangelis Pavlidis

Lisbon powerhouse **Benfica**, twice winners of the old European Cup in the 1960s, have every chance of pushing on. New head coach Marco Silva, back in his home city after a decade away working in Greece and the Premier League, is a master team-builder and has an abundance of attacking talent at his disposal in second striker Rafa Silva, Greece striker Vangelis Pavlidis, Norway winger Andreas Schjelderup, Colombia enigma Jhon Duran and Belgium flyer Dodi Lukebakio.

German champions as recently as 2023-24, **Bayer Leverkusen** may be in rebuilding mode at the moment, but don't make the mistake of writing them off. Their new Catalan coach Carles Martinez Novell, previously in charge of Toulouse in France, is one of the brightest thinkers in Europe and with strikers of the calibre of the Czech star Patrik Schick and young Cameroon international Christian Kofane, goals certainly should not be a problem.

About to play in Europe for the first time in 53 years, a reborn **Sunderland** will be hoping to tap into the fervour generated by their most unexpected renaissance, a rise from the ashes masterminded by Breton coach Regis Le Bris. As indicated by their seventh-place finish in the Premier League last term, they are an outfit to be reckoned with, Le Bris' tactical acumen dove-tailing with a multitude of emerging talents (Malick Fofana, Chemsdine Talbi, Nilson Angulo, Brian Brobbey, Habib Diarra, Noah Sadiki and Dayann Methalie), and the hard-nosed leadership of seasoned Switzerland midfielder Granit Xhaka.

DARK HORSES

No matter that **Rennes** have spent the last three seasons outside of Ligue 1's top five, the Bretons are a side on the up – as they proved by giving French champions Paris Saint-Germain the fright of their lives in a 2-2 draw on the opening day of the new domestic campaign. That followed a summer of positive developments at Roazhon Park, notably the decision of striker Esteban Lepaul, their top scorer in the league in 2025-26, to extend his contract and the arrival from Sunderland of Spanish Under-21 attacker Eliezer Mayenda.

In a concerted bid to kick-start a brave new world of success, Istanbul behemoths **Besiktas** have been splashing out left, right and centre on proven ability, bringing in Belgium winger Leandro Trossard from Arsenal, Serbia striker Dusan Vlahovic (ex-Juventus), highly-rated Dutch winger Ernest Poku on loan from Leverkusen, and former Bayern Munich and Stuttgart goalkeeper Alexander Nubel. If head coach Vincenzo Italiano – a Conference League runner-up with Fiorentina in both 2022-23 and 2023-24 – finds the right mix, the Black Eagles could take some stopping.

After a mediocre showing in the Eredivisie last season, **AZ** seem to have regained their mojo. It's been 45 years since they last played in a continental final – losing to Ipswich Town 5-4 on aggregate in the 1981 UEFA Cup showpiece – and they are certainly due a deep run in Europe. In highly-rated schemer Kees Smit, goalscoring winger Ro-Zangelo Daal and centre-forward Mexx Meerdink, they have the youthful exuberance and class to make it happen.

Besiktas new boy... Leandro Trossard left Arsenal for Istanbul

On the up ...Breton side Rennes

WHO'S WHO?

- Anderlecht
- Ararat-Armenia
- AZ
- Bayer Leverkusen
- Benfica
- Besiktas
- Bournemouth
- Celje
- Celta Vigo
- Celtic
- Crystal Palace
- Dinamo Zagreb
- Ferencvaros
- Hapoel Be'er Sheva
- Hoffenheim
- Jagiellonia Bialystok
- Juventus
- Lech Poznan
- Levski Sofia
- Lillestrom
- Lyon
- Marseille
- Milan
- NEC
- OFI
- Olympiacos
- Omonia
- Real Sociedad
- Red Bull Salzburg
- Rennes
- Sparta Prague
- Sturm Graz
- Sunderland
- Torreense
- Union Saint-Gilloise
- Viktoria Plzen

Conference League preview

Who will be the sixth team to win UEFA's newest club competition? By ***Nick Bidwell***...

Conference League contenders...Serie A side Atalanta

The sixth edition of the Conference League should make for the most vibrant of melting pots. In one corner, the smaller-nation representatives eagerly anticipating the new frontier of a Europe-wide league phase: Inter Club d'Escaldes, the first Andorran club to reach this stage of a UEFA trophy-hunt; Egnatia from Albania; Georgian outfit Iberia 1999; Kauno Zalgiris of Lithuania and Latvian side Riga. In the other, the eight big-hitters who have already played in a European final: four-time Champions League victors Ajax, Red Star Belgrade, who won the same competition back in 1990-91; 2023-24 Europa League winners Atalanta, plus Monaco, Panathinaikos, Twente, Braga and Freiburg, who lost to Aston Villa in last season's Europa League final.

Big or small, financially liquid or strapped for cash, high-profile or anonymous – all have a shot in their own way.

FAVOURITES

Ajax, whose reputation as serial title winners and Total Football disciples has become degraded of late, would be sorely tempted to use steady European progress here as a convenient platform for a relaunch. Now led by the former Rayo Vallecano and Girona boss Michel, the Amsterdammers went big on the tried and trusted in the summer transfer market, recruiting German attacking midfielder Julian Brandt (ex-Dortmund), former Barcelona goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen and Brazilian striker Marcos Leonardo (Al Hilal).

Back in Europe... Dutch giants Ajax

Frequent flyers in Europe over the last decade, **Atalanta** certainly know their continental topography and while they have struggled somewhat since coaching legend Gian Piero Gasperini left for Roma 15 months ago, they should have too much individual and collective wherewithal for most of their opponents in this competition. Tellingly, new *La Dea* head coach Maurizio Sarri claims that standards in the Conference League have markedly improved and that his side must tread carefully.

In only their second season of continental exchanges, **Brighton & Hove Albion** will definitely fancy their chances of a lengthy march in Europe. An eighth-place finish in the Premier League was an outstanding achievement for a club with relatively little in the way of top-level heritage and though three of their most influential players – striker Danny Welbeck, midfielder Carlos Baleba and centre-back Jan Paul van Hecke – left in the summer, the fiery Bavarian head coach Fabian Hurzeler is still spoilt for choice.

IN CONTENTION

ABOVE: Impressive qualifiers...Portuguese side Braga

RIGHT: One to watch ...Monaco new boy Paris Brunner

Freiburg, the Black Forest club that has gone from yo-yo team to established Bundesliga force over the last decade, are not ones to sneer at the prospect of supposed low-maintenance continental action. They were proud runners-up in the Europa League last season and will apply themselves just as seriously in this tertiary arena. Few German sides can match the Freiburger for their togetherness and tactical discipline. Watch out for outstanding Japanese No.10 Yuito Suzuki.

Braga, who did not concede a single goal in six undefeated games in qualification for the Conference League mass event, have an enviable track record of pulling out all the stops in Europe, runners-up to compatriots Porto in the 2010-11 Europa League final and reaching the semi-final stage of the same competition last season. Key to their well-being is the evergreen duo of 40-year-old controlling midfielder Joao Moutinho and the versatile Ricardo Horta, club captain and an inspiration anywhere in the attacking third.

Left more than a little disorientated after failing to make the Champions League cut, **Monaco** now have to grit their teeth and go again in the totally alien confines of the Conference League. The good news, though, is the inordinate number of top-quality youngsters in the ranks, not least Brazilian left-back Nazinho – recently recruited from Cercle Brugge – ebullient Belgian winger or attacking midfielder Stanis Idumbo and Paris Brunner, a Germany Under-20 striker of almost limitless potential.

DARK HORSES

Make no mistake. No one in the Conference League will relish going toe-to-toe with the ever-abrasive warriors of **Getafe**, a La Liga team with scant interest in the niceties of the beautiful game. Direct and strong aerially, the side from Greater Madrid rarely weave pretty patterns but are uncompromisingly effective. This will be only their fourth European expedition, having competed three times in the UEFA Cup/Europa League. Although, as coach Jose Bordalas rightly points out, a lack of squad depth may be a problem.

A more than respectable third-place finish in the Swiss top flight last season, **Lugano** have improved year on year since astute and charismatic coach Mattia Croci-Torti was handed the reins in 2021. Owned by US billionaire Joe Mansueto, whose portfolio also includes MLS outfit Chicago Fire, the Ticino club relocated last year to a new stadium, the AIL Arena. Key players include ex-Union Berlin striker Kevin Behrens, German-Greek defender Antonios Papadopoulos and the wonderfully-named Colombian winger Beckham Castro.

Belgian side **Gent** recently underlined their competitiveness with a 2-1 win over Club Brugge, the undisputed number one in the country's football hierarchy. Not so long ago, Gent coach Rik De Mil, appointed midway through last season, was claiming the team lacked creativity and demanding squad reinforcements. That Club Brugge scalp proved otherwise and in Senegalese winger El Hadji Seck, Panama striker Josue Vergara and Senegal No.9 Ibrahima Cisse, they have a fine trio of teenage value.

Teenage talent...Gent striker Ibrahima Cisse

Direct attackers... La Liga battlers Getafe

WHO'S WHO?

- AGF
- Ajax
- Atalanta
- Borac Banja Luka
- Braga
- Brann
- Brighton & Hove Albion
- Copenhagen
- CSKA Sofia
- Egnatia
- Freiburg
- Gent
- Getafe
- Hajduk Split
- Hearts
- Iberia 1999
- Inter Club d'Escaldes
- Jablonec
- Kairat
- Kauno Zalgiris
- KuPS
- Lincoln Red Imps
- Lugano
- Midtjylland
- Mjallby
- Monaco
- Nordsjaelland
- Pafos
- Panathinaikos
- Red Star Belgrade
- Riga
- Sint-Truiden
- Thun
- Trabzonspor
- Twente
- Universitatea Craiova

HARRY KANE

"I thought I'd come back to England, but that itch isn't there as much anymore"

After collecting the ESM Golden Shoe for the second time, the Bayern Munich and England striker discusses his career, his goals for the new season, and his future

How much does it mean to you to win the Golden Shoe again?
I'm extremely proud to receive my second one now and I think this one definitely feels a little bit more special after the season we had as a team, to win the three trophies we did. My goal is always to help the team in every aspect so it's something I'm definitely proud of. Receiving the award is a great day for me, for all the Bayern staff and coaches and, obviously, my family who are here as well. It's just a great day. Perfect!

Who do you think will be the most difficult opponents for Bayern this season in the Champions League?
We're looking forward, for sure, to coming up against the best teams in Europe. Paris Saint-Germain are back-to-back champions – they're going to be really difficult and obviously ambitious to reach the final again. There's Real Madrid...so many top teams that you have to beat to be European champions. I'm looking forward to that challenge again. We know the games will come thick and fast once the Champions League starts. We got extremely close to the final last season so this year we need to try to do everything to go that one step further.

Your coach, Vincent Kompany, once joked that you were quite easy to defend against because you were always on the highest line but now you're playing a different game. What was behind your decision to change your style of play, and do you think this is the best Harry Kane ever?
Yes, I think this is the best version of myself for sure and last season stands as the best in my career. Since the boss has come in here, he's helped elevate my game to another level and that's down to our style of play. I have the freedom to come and receive the ball sometimes deeper and arrive in the box later, so it's a mixture of different things. I think I also played a lot of these different positions during my Tottenham career. For example, especially from the Mourinho stage onwards, I had freedom to come back deeper and I had a great relationship with Heung-min Son. I just think this past season, with the team I had around me with these players and the assistance from the coach, my game's elevated to another level. I use my instinct and my freedom to score the goals I score but also to dictate the pace sometimes. Each game poses a different test and determines what job I need to do.

What personal goals have you set yourself for this season?
My personal goal is always to improve and get better. The way I'm feeling right now mentally and physically, there's no reason why I can't push to another level again. For me, improving is not just about the goals but dealing with all the different challenges in every season both on and off the pitch. You always know the goals are a consequence of a load of hard work behind the scenes, doing stuff every day even when people aren't watching. Time will tell, but right now it's just about seeing if I can improve the numbers again and do my job for the team – that's the most important thing.

It's been a long season from last summer right through the World Cup. How are you feeling about coming straight back out and tackling a new year for England?
I'm pretty much used to a major tournament three years out of four and always going pretty far in all of them. In a way, sometimes it suits me. You don't lose too much fitness, you get into the routine of coming back out and going again and that's where I'm at now. Obviously it was an amazing summer in a lot of ways, of course really disappointing to lose in the semi-finals. But to win the third-place game was important for the team and also the fans. Now, for the new season, we're back at the bottom of the mountain again with the Nations League then going into the European qualifiers. The Euros being in England in a couple years is a big motivation. First it's just about getting back into club football, hitting the ground running, hopefully scoring some goals and then before we know it we're back into the

international scene. There are a lot of things to process that we've done in the summer – both the good things and also things we can improve on.

Was there any particular defender who was a difficult test last season?
I've come up against all the best defenders in Europe and in the world, and I love playing against the best because they bring out the best in me. PSG were tough matches with Marquinhos and [Willian] Pacho, two great defenders. We had good battles against them. They won some duels, I won some. So they're probably two that stand out.

Do you love making a sliding tackle as much as scoring a goal?
Scoring a goal is the best feeling in terms of the moment with the celebration and the adrenaline, but I also love different parts of my game – the sliding tackles or tackling back, and when I'm watching clips to improve my whole game, I find myself watching those moments maybe more than the goals now. I think that's just because I've always been like that, I've always loved being a team player and doing my bit for the team. I love to see the reactions of the other players when I do those types of things. It's a big part of my game that maybe isn't always seen because of the goals, obviously, but maybe in the last couple of years people have been seeing more of that and maybe appreciating it a little bit more.

Have you thought about winning the Ballon d'Or this year, especially since the ceremony will be in London?
From an individual perspective, the Ballon d'Or is the biggest thing you can achieve but it's not in my hands. I've done what I could in terms of performances. Of course, it would be fantastic if it worked out but there are still months to go until a decision is made.

Do you still have any ambition to come back to England and break the Premier League's all-time goalscoring record?
When I first left English football then for sure I thought I'd definitely be coming back, but that itch isn't there as much anymore. I'm extremely happy here in Munich, I think it's opened my eyes to a totally different world of football and made me appreciate European football even more. With the team we have here, with the manager, and with my family really settled, it's just about being in the best place possible. Never say never, but for now I'm concentrating on Bayern Munich and we'll see what the future holds.

Interview courtesy of European Sports Media. The Golden Shoe is administered by ESM, the European Sports Media association of which World Soccer is a member.

Photo credit: FC Bayern

'THE BEST COACH IN THE WORLD'

Why Portugal turned to the brash, blunt and brilliant Jorge Jesus as their new manager

Words: Tom Kundert

Jorge Jesus exudes the demeanour of a man not overly concerned with what others think of him. He freely admits he lives only for football and has absolute confidence in his own abilities. "I'm not only the best Portuguese coach; I'm the best coach in the world," he said when asked to compare himself to Jose Mourinho. "I don't believe anyone knows more about football than me."

It may appear a ridiculous statement but Jesus' every word is uttered with such conviction, in a tone akin to an angry challenge to disprove him, that one can only conclude he truly believes it. The contrast with the polite, smiling and charming manner of his predecessor Roberto Martinez as Portugal manager could not be starker. Portugal's national team press conferences will have a very different feel about them. Jesus will bark back at journalists who deign to question his methods or choices.

"Intense" is the word that best describes Jesus' management style. Some have questioned whether his exhaustive training sessions and meticulous attention to detail can translate into international management given that the players meet infrequently and only for short periods. But the 72-year-old quickly shot down any such notion in his unveiling press conference: "It's easy working with world-class players. What's tough is training players who think they are top players but they aren't. Do you think the players won't train? That they'll just come here to sleep? They will be training hard and there are many ways to get around the lack of time nowadays."

Jesus' bloody-mindedness and creativity are easily detectable qualities over his long career, but his capacity for hard work is a facet that is sometimes overlooked. It is a mantra that can be traced back to when he first made the decision that football would define his life.

"When I was an adolescent, I worked as a welder in the day in Lisbon and then crossed the River Tagus to train for Cova da Piedade in the evenings. One day, my mother put a bowl of soup in front of me and I was so tired my head fell in the soup and I fell asleep in it. That's when my father [Virgolino de Jesus, who had played for Sporting in the 1940s] said it couldn't go on like that. I had to make a choice: work or football. That's when I decided I would choose football."

Jesus would go on to emulate his father and don the green and white of Lisbon giants Sporting, albeit only briefly in an unremarkable playing career. It was as a coach that he would make his name. Steadily working his way up the football ladder, "JJ", as he has been dubbed by the Portuguese media, was appointed Benfica manager in 2009 two decades and ten clubs after his first coaching appointment.

To fully grasp the magnitude of the job Jesus did at Benfica, one need only look at the state of Portugal's biggest club before and after his arrival.

He took over a dysfunctional institution crushed by the shadow of its glorious past and the glaring superiority of hated rivals, Porto. The Eagles had won the championship only once in the previous 15 seasons, while Porto had lifted the crown 11 times in that timespan. Worse, the northern rivals were also busy building a European legacy, further consigning Benfica's historical achievements to a distant memory.

Jesus changed all that. In his very first season at the helm in 2009-10, he won the championship in exhilarating fashion. In JJ's six years in charge, Benfica won the title three

VIEMOS
PARA VENCER
26-30

times, and were it not for two late collapses – throwing away winning positions with the finishing tape in sight – Benfica would have been celebrating five titles in six seasons.

Under Jesus, the team also performed creditably in Europe, with two successive Europa League final appearances (2013 and 2014) restoring their stature as a club worthy of respect in UEFA's competitions.

His resounding success at the Estadio da Luz made what came next all the more sensational. Jesus dramatically defected from Benfica for the club a couple of miles down the road, city rivals Sporting.

The sense of betrayal was acute and the fallout was ugly.

"Next year we will have a coach committed to Benfica and not one only interested in his ego and his bank balance," thundered Benfica's director of communications Joao Gabriel. "I'm grateful to Jorge Jesus for the ingratitude he showed us. He showed us we deserve to change."

Jesus himself cited sentimental reasons for the switch, apparently motivated by the wishes of his father, whose health was failing at the time, and his own past as a former Sporting player.

The consensus, however, was that financial considerations – Benfica refused to meet his wage demands in contrast to Sporting – and the desire to cement his legacy were the main reasons behind the stunning move. If Jesus could bring similar success to Sporting, a club that had won the Portuguese title only twice in the previous 33 years, he would go down as one of the greatest Portuguese coaches of all time.

"We have to awaken this sleeping giant!" shouted Jesus as he was presented on the Alvalade pitch, alongside firebrand president Bruno de Carvalho, to the delight of the thousands of supporters who had filled into the stadium to welcome him to the green half of the city. "From now on, Sporting will be in contention to win all the trophies in Portugal!"

Brazilian league champion...Jesus celebrates the 2019 title

> "We've had foreign coaches before in Brazil but I don't think any of them compare to him"
>
> Pele on Jesus' impact at Flamengo

Controversial...Jesus back at Benfica as coach of Sporting

It started well with a Portuguese Super Cup victory over former club Benfica, but Jesus was unable to replicate his success at Sporting. He clashed with Carvalho – two larger-than-life characters with incendiary personalities who made for an explosive environment – and his time at the Alvalade ended in fiasco. A group of 50 masked ultras invaded the club's Alcochete training complex and attacked the coaching staff and players in what has been described as the worst day in the centenarian club's history. Days later, a traumatised team lost the Portuguese Cup final to relegation-threatened Desportivo das Aves.

It was a chastening demise to his Sporting project and a rude interruption to Jesus' upward career trajectory. He decided to try his luck abroad, initially in Saudi Arabia, before bouncing back in Brazil with another thunderously successful spell.

His arrival at Flamengo was met with scepticism. Local journalist Marco Vargas energetically railed against the appointment, saying Jesus was too old, that his successes had been in a worthless league and claiming that the Portuguese coach was "too far from our reality to understand our league." With one third of the season played, the Rio de Janeiro club were eight points adrift of top spot.

A stunning run of 23 victories, four draws and just two defeats later, and Jesus had led Flamengo to the Brazilian championship, winning it by a massive 16-point margin. Not satisfied with conquering Brazil, Jesus led Fla to triumph in the Copa Libertadores, the team's first victory in the competition since a Zico-inspired side lifted South

CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

ARRIGO SACCHI

Known for the fast, dynamic, attacking football his teams play, Jesus' ability to get his sides defending competently is sometimes overlooked. His blueprint comes from Arrigo Sacchi's Milan side and the legendary defensive system enacted by Franco Baresi, Alessandro Costacurta and Paolo Maldini, with Jesus travelling to Italy early in his coaching career to understand it better. Zonal marking and collective synchronisation with the entire team involved in defensive tactical organisation is a hallmark of his management.

RINUS MICHELS/ STEFAN KOVACS

Jesus has spoken about how he grew up watching the great Ajax team of the early 1970s, coached first by Dutchman Rinus Michels, then Romanian manager Stefan Kovacs. The revolutionary idea of "total football" whereby all players had to defend and attack – a completely new way of looking at the game – left a huge impression on him. Therefore, Jesus has always championed collective movement and tactical organisation as core tenets of his football philosophy. He is often referred to in the Portuguese press as "*o mestre de tatica*" – the tactical master.

JOHAN CRUYFF

In Jesus' own words: "Even as a player [Cruyff] was a great reference point, but what made me a huge admirer of his were the ideas he put into practice as Barcelona coach. He believed football was art and entertainment. It wasn't by chance that he said he preferred to win 5-4 rather than 1-0. I was influenced by the idea that winning is important, but it's not enough. But there's only one Cruyff. He was a great figure, one of the great thinkers and creators of modern football."

MARIO ZAGALLO

It was inevitable Jesus would coach in Brazil one day and his remarkable accomplishments there should not have come as a surprise. Even before he was appointed Flamengo manager, Jesus' inner circle would describe how he stayed up half the night watching endless games of the Brazilian league. It was an obsession, he says, that began with Mario Zagallo's 1970 Brazil side, inspiring him to ensure that his teams play flamboyant football as well as winning football.

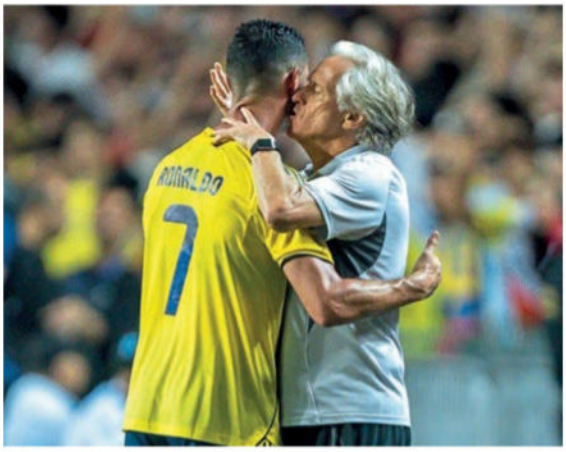
America's continental trophy in 1981.

All resistance had been thoroughly quashed as the barbs from local pundits were replaced by gushing praise. "We've had foreign coaches before in Brazil but I don't think any of them compare to him," commented Pele. The impact Jesus had on the country's football is still felt today: Portuguese coaches currently manage five of the 20 top-flight clubs and have won three of the last six titles.

Jesus had always been a huge fan of Brazilian football and the admiration was now mutual. He claimed he was on the cusp of being hired as Brazil coach, but he had to refuse because he had made promises to his employers in Saudi Arabia that could not be broken.

One year in Brazil was enough for Jesus. A brief and unhappy return to Benfica was followed by domination of a new continent, as the coach took his winning habit to Saudi Arabia, initially at Al Hilal where he established a new world record of 28 consecutive victories on the way to winning the league.

His next challenge was at Al Nassr, working alongside Cristiano Ronaldo. The Portugal captain had not won the Saudi Pro League since arriving in the country three years previously, but Jesus duly worked his magic as Al Nassr pipped JJ's former team Al Hilal to claim the 2025-26 crown as national champions.



Reunited...Jesus will work with Cristiano Ronaldo again

Ironically, a few months later, the ambitions of two of Portugal's most successful football personalities of this century would be intimately intertwined again. The Portugal captain said he had played his last World Cup game following defeat to Spain in Dallas and elimination from the competition, triggering speculation that his glorious career for the *Selecao* had reached its conclusion. Ronaldo's role for Portugal and the pros and cons he brings to the team have been under severe scrutiny over several tournaments.

As usual, Jesus is adamant he can succeed where others have failed. "Cris will never be a problem, either for the *Selecao* or for me. I had the pleasure of working with him for a year. When I thought he should play, he played. When I thought he shouldn't play, he didn't. Names mean nothing for me. I'll do what's best for the *Selecao*."

INTERNATIONAL COACHES

In the wake of the 2026 World Cup, dozens of national teams opted for managerial change. Here are some of the fresh faces...

BELGIUM

Out: *Rudi Garcia* ★ **In:** *Mark van Bommel*

Even before his baptism of fire against Italy, France and Turkey in the Nations League, the new manager has proven to be a divisive choice. Garcia, a Frenchman, achieved his benchmarks, keeping Belgium in the Nations League A League and reaching the last eight of the World Cup. So why did the Belgian FA part ways with him? That's the question press and fans have posed. Besides, Van Bommel's record is mixed. Beyond short spells at PSV and Wolfsburg, he won the league and cup double with Antwerp in 2023, bankrolled by a big-spending owner. He departed a year later and remained out of management. Now, he has everything to prove.

Samindra Kunti

ALGERIA

Out: *Vladimir Petkovic* ★ **In:** *Brahim Hemdani*

Just three weeks before kicking off their AFCON 2027 qualifying campaign, Algeria settled on French-born Brahim Hemdani as new coach. It was only in July that he took over the U20s, and won gold at the Mediterranean Games in August, but failure to find a higher-profile replacement for Vladimir Petkovic left the Algerian federation handing Hemdani a swift promotion. He had a successful playing career, reaching two UEFA Cup finals – with Marseille in 2004 and Rangers in 2008 – but only accepted Algerian overtures to play for them at the age of 30, initially holding out for a France call-up. As a coach, he won promotion from the French fifth tier with Marignane GCB in 2023, but that is the extent of his experience. No details of any contract suggests it might be a "let's see how it goes" arrangement for now.

Mark Gleeson

Credit: Instagram @MarignaneGCB

FRANCE

Out: *Didier Deschamps* ★ **In:** *Zinedine Zidane*

The anticipation of Zinedine Zidane's appointment as new France manager was massively heightened by the certainty of it. There was a feeling post-Euro 2024 that Didier Deschamps, despite everything he has done with *Les Bleus*, had outstayed his welcome. Across the country, there was a desire for something fresh, and that was evident in a growing ambivalence and decreasing attendance at France matches. When Deschamps announced in January 2025 that he would be leaving the role, there was only ever one option. Since leaving Real Madrid for the second time in 2021, Zidane had countless opportunities to return to management, but it became common knowledge that he was holding out for his dream job. He perhaps had to wait, but the man who won the World Cup and the Ballon d'Or in 1998 is now exactly where he wants to be.

Luke Entwistle

CROATIA

Out: *Zlatko Dalic* ★ **In:** *Slaven Bilic*

Croatia enjoyed tremendous success for almost a decade under Dalic, yet it could be argued that this era began with Bilic, who was coach from 2006 to 2012. It was under the ex-West Ham boss that the team reached the quarter-finals of Euro 2008 – topping a qualifying group that contained England, and then beating Germany at the finals – and that national team stalwarts like Luka Modric and Ivan Perisic rose to prominence. The time for a new-look side has not arrived just yet, with both Modric and Perisic included in the latest squad for the Nations League.

Jamie Evans

CZECH REPUBLIC

Out: *Miroslav Koubek* ★ **In:** *Santi Denia*

Drastic times call for drastic measures and after a World Cup campaign that could be best described as "inept", with just one point in an early exit, the Czechs have hired their first-ever foreign coach. Spaniard Denia, a former Atletico Madrid defender who coached Spain's youth teams for 15 years and won gold at the 2024 Tokyo Olympics, was appointed by Czech legend Pavel Nedved, now general manager of the national team, who cited his "extensive experience" and "significant success with the Spanish national teams." Denia will face his home country in the upcoming Nations League campaign.

Nick Bidwell & Jamie Evans

CAPE VERDE

Out: *Bubista* ★ **In:** *Humberto Bettencourt*

The African island nation has opted for continuity after an exhilarating World Cup experience, promoting Bettencourt from assistant to take over from Bubista, who left for Morocco's RS Berkane. The hope is that the 51-year-old keeps the country up among Africa's footballing elite and qualifies first for the next Cup of Nations, having missed out on the last edition in Morocco at the turn of this year. Cape Verde have Liberia, Mali and Rwanda in their group. Bettencourt was Bubista's assistant for six years and will have intimate knowledge of the players and their capabilities, but he has no prior experience of either playing or coaching at any major level of senior football, and his appointment must be seen as something of a risk, particularly given the federation now has a large kitty to bring in a much more qualified coach. Putting Bettencourt in charge shows the priority is keeping intact the family atmosphere around the side.

Mark Gleeson

ECUADOR

Out: *Sebastian Beccacece* ★ **In:** *Marcelo Gallardo*

A statue of Gallardo stands outside the stadium of River Plate, where he enjoyed an epic eight-year spell as coach. It seemed that the world's top jobs might be his for the taking. But maybe he stayed too long, or spent too long defining his future when he left. Because all that happened afterwards was a disappointing spell in Saudi Arabia and a disastrous return to River. Now, at 50, he will seek to rebuild his career by getting the best out of the fine crop of young talent that Ecuador is producing. This is not an easy job. Expectations are high, and the locals can be quick to turn on the coach. But Gallardo brings the credibility of over 40 Argentina caps plus the memory of that first spell with River, when his tactical acumen won him the nickname, "Napoleon."

Tim Vickery

GERMANY

Out: *Julian Nagelsmann*
★ **In:** *Jurgen Klopp*

Anyone expecting a nice, gentle introduction to the Klopp era would have been sorely disappointed as the ex-Liverpool boss threatened to quit as Germany boss in his very first press conference. In a warning to the media, he declared: "If you behave badly and don't leave my family in peace, I'm gone." Klopp also promised the German public "very good, very intense football," adding: "I've lived and experienced how football can change a city... Ideally, football can change a country." Premature exits from the last three World Cups have left the nation in a state of shock, and for the majority of fans, serial winner Klopp represents the last chance to launch the fightback. The country is not totally united behind Klopp, however, with some not yet forgiving him for joining the Red Bull project in January 2025. In the home of the 50+1 rule, the energy drink MCO group are still hugely divisive.

Nick Bidwell & Jamie Evans

GHANA

Out: *Carlos Queiroz* ★ **In:** *Carlos Queiroz*

Queiroz left after the World Cup but was persuaded to return after persistent approaches from the Ghana FA. He was popular with the players, who pressured the association to keep the 73-year-old. Queiroz will be based in Lisbon and travel on weekends to scout stars across Europe and then go to Africa in the international windows. His appointment, through until next year, gives him another crack at AFCON glory. He finished as a runner-up with Egypt in the 2021 final, and next year's tournament in East Africa is arguably his last chance at winning.

Mark Gleeson

HAITI

Out: *Sebastien Migne* ★ **In:** *David Badia*

Badia's already ahead of his predecessor in one respect: the fact that he's actually been to Haiti. Migne's navigation of World Cup qualifying was made all the more remarkable by the fact that they were not able to play games on home soil. But Badia wasted no time in paying his first visit, conducting his unveiling press conference from Port-au-Prince. The Spaniard has worked as a youth coach at Barca and for clubs in Turkey, Cyprus and Poland, but this is his first taste of international football. He'll seek to build on the work done by Migne, who joined Gabon.

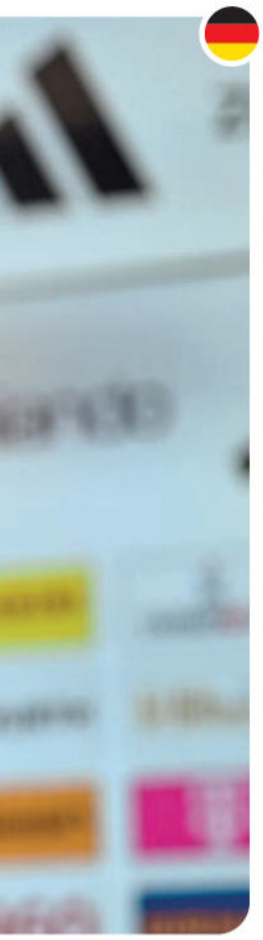
Jamie Evans

ITALY

Out: *Gennaro Gattuso*
★ **In:** *Roberto Mancini*

"I'm very sorry," Mancini said on his Italy return, three years after quitting for Saudi Arabia. "I'm very sorry also for everything that happened over the last three years. I'm going to try to bring the national team back to where it belongs." Among those to disapprove of his return was Fabio Capello, who told *Gazzetta dello Sport* that Mancini's decision to quit was "really bad". The Euro 2020-winning coach's first task, then, is to seek the forgiveness of the Italian footballing public, which will only be granted if he is successful.

Jamie Evans



IVORY COAST

Out: *Emerse Fae* ★ **In:** *Herve Renard*

Renard returns to take charge of the team he took to AFCON glory in 2015, replacing Fae, whose contract was not renewed despite leading the Ivorians to the 2023 title and the knockout rounds of the World Cup for the first time. Renard was also at the 2026 finals, parachuted in as coach for Tunisia after their disastrous opening game, but was unable to turn the tide for the North Africans. There was a chance he might stay on, but the Ivorian offer holds much more potential with an exciting team to be considered one of the fancied sides for next year's AFCON in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The Frenchman has also coached Zambia (twice), Angola, Morocco and Saudi Arabia. In between the two stints with the Saudis, he also coached France's women at the Paris Olympics two years ago.

Mark Gleeson

MEXICO

Out: *Javier Aguirre* ★ **In:** *Rafael Marquez*

Groomed to be Mexico's next coach after becoming Aguirre's assistant in 2024, Marquez's promotion is eagerly anticipated. A natural leader as a player, captaining his country at five World Cups, he cut his coaching teeth with Barcelona's B team, and at one stage was linked with the top job at Camp Nou. Instead he came home to help *El Tri* prepare for the World Cup on home soil before leading them to the 2030 finals. Joining him in the dugout is Juan Manuel Lillo, who as well as managing several clubs around the world in a 45-year career also served as Pep Guardiola's assistant at Manchester City. At his first media call, Marquez preached continuity, seeking to build on the work he and Aguirre did together. His tenure begins with four friendlies, before November's CONCACAF Nations League quarter-finals.

Jamie Evans

KAZAKHSTAN

Out: *Talgat Baysufinov*
★ **In:** *John van 't Schip*

After watching neighbours Uzbekistan at the World Cup, Kazakhstan were left wondering if they should have stayed in Asia instead of joining UEFA in 2002. Tasked with finding a route to a first major tournament is new general secretary Scott Munn. For the Australian's first appointment he turned to a coach he knew well, having worked with Van 't Schip at Melbourne City. After a fine playing career as a winger for Ajax and the Netherlands, the Dutch coach built a cosmopolitan CV, including with the national teams of Armenia and Greece. Now his aim is to qualify for Euro 2028.

John Duerden

NETHERLANDS

Out: *Ronald Koeman* ★ **In:** *Xavi*

The KNVB's appointment of Xavi came as a surprise, but they had little choice after waiting until after the World Cup to discuss Koeman's successor. Arne Slot was a top target but withdrew, declaring that he preferred to continue working as a club coach for now. Others on the list included Pep Guardiola, Jurgen Klopp, Peter Bosz, Erik ten Hag and U21s coach Michael Reiziger. Xavi did accept the offer, even though few are impressed by his CV and many are surprised that someone with no national team coaching experience was immediately handed a four-year deal.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

JORDAN

Out: *Jamal Sellami* ★ **In:** *Ezzaki Badou*

Just over a year after Sellami was given honorary citizenship of Jordan due to securing a first-ever World Cup spot, the Moroccan was out following three losses at the finals. "Zaki", African Footballer of the Year in 1986 when he starred for Morocco at the World Cup, is the third successive Jordan coach from the North African country. The 67-year-old has spoken of evolution more than revolution, building on what his compatriots have already done. Now the job is simple: keep Jordan at the top of the continental game – starting with January's Asian Cup – and then prepare for qualification for a return to the global stage.

John Duerden

ROMANIA

Out: *Mircea Lucescu* ★ **In:** *Gheorghe Hagi*

A hugely emotional appointment with one legend of Romanian football replacing another – not out of choice, but following Lucescu's death in April. In a sense, it is a continuity appointment given that Hagi was hugely influenced by Lucescu having played over 100 games under him at Brescia, Galatasaray and the national team. But the man known as "The King" will undoubtedly put his own stamp on the side on what is his second stint in charge, 25 years on from a four-game spell at the end of 2001.

Jamie Evans

SCOTLAND

Out: *Steve Clarke* ★ **In:** *Sebastien Pocognoli*

Clarke's resignation after the World Cup left the Scottish FA with a problem to solve. With no standout Scottish candidates available, a data-led search took Hampden bosses to Pocognoli, whose Belgian title with Union SG in 2025 marked him out as one of Europe's brightest young coaches. After seven years of Clarke's pragmatism, there was an appetite for something new. Pocognoli's promise of a front-foot team that gives "good vibes and energy" has gone down well. With Scotland co-hosting Euro 2028, and the squad in need of a revamp, there's expectation on the new boss but also optimism that he can build on Clarke's solid base.

Andy Coyle

SENEGAL

Out: *Pape Thiaw* ★ **In:** *Patrick Vieira*

The France World Cup winner, 50, returns to the country of his birth as head coach of Senegal after a lengthy and surprisingly divisive process. Not all within the decision-making process were convinced by Vieira's coaching CV, which includes stints in Major League Soccer, Ligue 1, the Premier League and Serie A. In his first international role, his immediate task will be qualifying for the next AFCON, but that should be a breeze. Just as important will be overseeing the transition to a younger generation, without the likes of Sadio Mane, Idrissa Gana Gueye and Kalidou Koulibaly, who all won a century of caps but performed below expectation at the World Cup in North America.

Mark Gleeson

SOUTH AFRICA

Out: *Hugo Broos* ★ **In:** *Pitso Mosimane*

Mosimane returns to the South Africa job determined to prove himself after being involved with one of the most embarrassing moments in the country's footballing history. Earmarked as a potential *Bafana Bafana* coach as early as 2004 and assistant at the 2010 World Cup, he took charge for South Africa's 2012 AFCON qualifying campaign. Believing they only required a draw in the final game at home to Sierra Leone when they actually needed a win, he employed restrictive tactics in the mistaken belief that one point would be enough to qualify. *Bafana Bafana* celebrated after the match only to be told they'd misunderstood the regulations that gave head-to-head tiebreakers precedence over goal difference. Mosimane bounced back to win three African Champions League titles, one with Mamelodi Sundowns in 2016 and two with Egyptian giants Al Ahly.

Mark Gleeson

SOUTH KOREA

Out: *Hong Myung-bo* ★ **In:** *Robert Moreno*

It has been a crazy summer in Korea with former coach Hong resigning after failing to get out of the group at the World Cup. He has since been investigated by police and had to answer questions in parliament. The Korean FA decided to appoint an interim for a few months and Robert Moreno has got the nod until the end of November – although if the country's first-ever Spanish boss impresses over the course of six friendlies, then his contract could be extended to cover January's Asian Cup and perhaps beyond. With spells in charge of Spain (nine games in 2019) as well as Monaco, Granada and Sochi, the KFA has said that the 48-year-old impressed in interviews with his thorough knowledge and analysis of Korean football, beating off the likes of Gus Poyet, who won the K-League with Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors in 2025, and former Iraq boss Jesus Casas.

John Duerden

TUNISIA

Out: *Herve Renard* ★ **In:** *Mouin Chaabani*

After the sacking of Sabri Lamouchi at the World Cup and Renard's installation in his place, Tunisia were expected to ask Renard to stay. But instead they went for ex-international defender Chaabani, who won a single cap as a sub in a friendly against Egypt in 2002. He has proven far more successful as a coach, with two Champions League titles with Esperance and then taking Moroccans RS Berkane to CAF Confederation Cup success and their first-ever league title in 2025. With much rebuilding required, the 45-year-old has signed a contract with Tunisia through to the 2030 World Cup.

Mark Gleeson

UKRAINE

Out: *Serhiy Rebrov* ★ **In:** *Andrea Maldera*

In May, Ukraine became yet another country to hire a foreign coach for the first time in their history, with Maldera arriving to replace Rebrov. The Italian is no stranger to Ukrainian football though; while working as a coach at Milan in the 2000s he crossed paths with Andriy Shevchenko, and when the former striker took charge of the national team in 2016 he employed Maldera as one of his assistants. He then assisted Roberto De Zerbi at Brighton and Marseille, but this is his first role as boss. In announcing the appointment, Shevchenko described Maldera as "an Italian with a Ukrainian soul." The 55-year-old already has his first win, beating Poland 2-0 in a friendly in May, but the real work begins with a trip to Hungary in the Nations League.

Jamie Evans

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Out: *Cosmin Olaroiu* ★ **In:** *Zlatko Dalic*

In Dalic's nine-year spell in charge of Croatia, he proved to be exactly what his new bosses are looking for: someone who can take a small nation as far as it can go. For UAE, that is simply to get to a World Cup. They got close to the 2026 tournament, but not close enough. Dalic has plenty of time and games: the eight-team Gulf Cup in September, which will be great preparation for January's Asian Cup. A good showing there – reaching the semi-finals, for example – would go down well with WC qualification starting later in the year. There is plenty of talent but forging a winning mentality is key.

John Duerden

URUGUAY

Out: *Marcelo Bielsa*
★ **In:** *Diego Forlan*

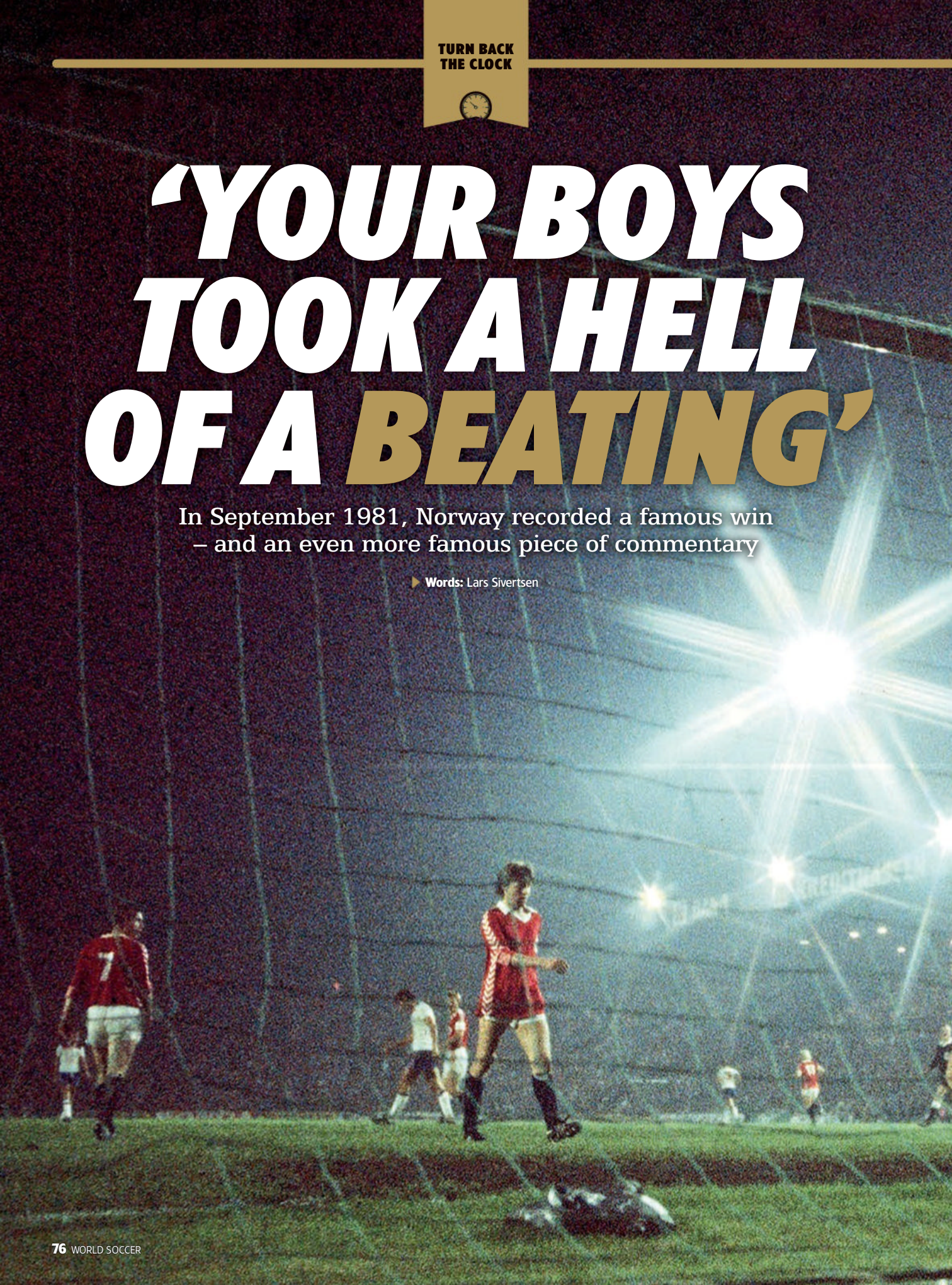
Diego Forlan's most important task with Uruguay is to take charge of the Under-20 side – a key conveyor belt of talent – in the South American Championship early next year. But, for the time being, he has also been handed the senior side, which is his domain until the local FA elections in March. It is up to Forlan, then, to steer Uruguay away from the ultimately frustrating Marcelo Bielsa era. The early signs are that there will be no radical change of personnel – almost the entire World Cup squad were named in a preliminary list for FIFA date friendlies against Japan, South Korea and India. Forlan's coaching experience is limited to two brief and unsuccessful spells in Uruguayan football at the start of the decade. It might seem scant qualification for the national team job – but Lionel Scaloni had less on his CV when he took charge of Argentina eight years ago.

Tim Vickery

'YOUR BOYS TOOK A HELL OF A BEATING'

In September 1981, Norway recorded a famous win – and an even more famous piece of commentary

Words: Lars Sivertsen



Bjorge Lillelien was walking his dog through the forest at Nesodden just outside of Oslo, as was his custom. Known to Norwegians as a reliably vivacious radio commentator, Lillelien was a far more reserved character outside of work. He greatly valued these walks ahead of a big live commentary, as it gave him a chance to run through potential scenarios and outcomes in his head. And on this day, Wednesday September 9, 1981, Lillelien wasn't doing just any commentary. Later that evening, the Norway national team would be taking on England, an opponent of near mythical significance for Norwegians.

Connections between Great Britain and Norway go back well over 1,000 years, with both trade and the odd invasion taking place. Unusually for the history of the British, it was them being invaded rather than the other way round. But after the unpleasantness of the Viking era, relations have been largely cordial.

And, as with so many countries around the world, it was the British who introduced football to Norway.

The first recorded football match in Norway took place in Bergen on September 24, 1886, as part of a visit by the Royal Navy's Channel Fleet. The early history of Norwegian football is littered with examples of British functionaries, engineers and similar types who found themselves working in Norway, and helped popularise the game in their local communities.

But what truly elevated Norway's relationship with English football took place in 1969. Norway, alongside Sweden and Denmark, started broadcasting live games from England's top division. And since Norway had only one television station at the time, the market share was, well, significant.

On that September evening in 1981, the Norway players who lined up against the English were mostly born in the mid-to-late 1950s, meaning they had been teenagers when the televised games from England first arrived in Norwegian living rooms. They looked up to the English players, had been inspired by them, and it's not a stretch to suggest that their whole idea of football had been moulded by images of Anfield, Highbury and Old Trafford. It was a massive night for Norway.

That said, hopes were not high. 1981 had seen Norway fall to World Cup qualifying defeats against Hungary and Romania, and lose 3-1 to Finland in the now-defunct Nordic Cup. They had played England at Wembley the year before in the reverse fixture and lost 4-0. The omens were not good.

In spite of the poor results, this was a significant group of players in the context of Norwegian football history.

For decades, Norwegian football had been run under a strict principle of amateurism. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that players at Norwegian clubs started earning salaries, and even then they were paltry, requiring most players to have day jobs. So

One night in Oslo... Norway v England during their 1982 World Cup qualifier

determined was the Norwegian FA to keep money out of the game that up until 1969, players who decided to go abroad and play professionally were banned from the national team. Per Bredesen, who won the *Scudetto* with Milan in 1957, didn't play a single game for Norway after leaving for Lazio in 1952 as his professional contract in Italy made him ineligible.

With this ban finally lifted, the door was opened for a wave of Norwegian footballing pioneers to go abroad. Centre-back Einar Aas had joined Bayern Munich in 1979, and in the summer of 1981 became the first Norwegian to play in English football when he moved to Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest. His partner at the back against England, Age Hareide, had moved to Manchester City that August. Midfielder Hallvar Thoresen had joined Twente in 1976 and in the summer of 1981 switched to PSV, where he would win the league three times and take his Eredivisie tally to 152 goals – a record for a foreign player that still stands today. Forward Arne Larsen Okland was playing for Bayer Leverkusen in the Bundesliga. After the FA's curious paranoia about money had strangled Norwegian football's development for decades, the team finally had a solid core of players with experience as full-time professionals.

And yet for all that, the team's biggest star was still playing in Norway – although not for lack of offers. In 1973, when Johan Cruyff moved from Ajax to Barcelona, the Dutch giants looked to a player from the Norwegian third tier as a possible replacement. That in itself is eccentric enough; odder still is the fact that the player from the Norwegian third tier turned them down.

But then there was nothing ordinary at all about Tom Lund. Born in 1950, he was multitalented as a youngster. Though football was and remained his true calling, he also played ice hockey to a high standard and achieved notable results at local athletics events as a youngster.

In his hometown of Lillestrom, Lund became something of a deity, scoring 197 goals in 348 games for his local club. They were in the third tier when he started playing for them, but by the time he retired in 1982 they had won the top-flight title twice and the cup three times. Having rejected numerous offers to move abroad, he instead remained a one-club man and turned his hometown team into a domestic powerhouse.

Norway's talisman... Tom Lund carries the ball during the game
Photo credit: Alamy

Because of his aversion to moving abroad and the scarcity of video recordings from the era, assessing his level in comparison to international contemporaries is difficult. But Hareide, who played with Lund for the national team and would go on to have a long and successful career in management, insisted that Lund was Norway's greatest-ever player.

"I played against people like [Gary] Lineker and [Ian] Rush, [Karl-Heinz] Rummenigge, [Michael] Laudrup and [Preben] Elkjaer – Tom had the same international level," Hareide told *VG* in 2016. "He had such a wide repertoire: he could go past people at speed, had great technique, and his reading of the game was immense. You could never get hold of him."

Only when Erling Haaland started smashing goalscoring records all across Europe would the old heads of Norwegian football reluctantly accept that Lund, who passed away in May of this year, had been eclipsed. But a title of "Norway's best player before Haaland" is some accolade for a man who never played outside of the Norwegian league.

So, at least on paper, England were

England's goalscorer... Bryan Robson drives through midfield

Famous win... Roger Albertsen (L) and captain Hallvar Thoresen (R) celebrate the victory

travelling to Oslo's Ullevaal Stadion to face the strongest Norway national team for many decades.

But things didn't start well for the hosts. England began with greater intensity, taking advantage of a disorganised Norwegian defence. Aas had been struck by a sudden migraine attack and, struggling to see clearly, asked to be substituted. Norwegian manager Tor Roste Fossen wasn't interested and told him to stay on the field.

England exploited the confusion. A clever headed flick from Kevin Keegan found Bryan Robson on a driving run from midfield, and although two Norway defenders and goalkeeper Tore Antonsen did their best to bring him down, Robson eventually found the net. Dreadful defending, but a fully deserved lead for the visitors.

The Norwegians did not crumble. With Aas' vision gradually returning, the defence firmed up, and the Norway midfield started to assert themselves. And, unsurprisingly, it was Lund who made the breakthrough.

He lined up to take a Norway corner from the right-hand side, sending a dangerous in-swinger with his left foot that Ray Clemence could only punch clear. The ball eventually came back out to Lund on the flank, who brought the ball under control with his chest before sending in another dangerous cross – this time with his right foot. With Clemence and Norway midfielder Roger Albertsen both challenging for the cross at the near post, the ball somehow squirmed under them and into the goal. A mistake by Clemence, no doubt, and while Albertsen would insist that he got a touch, up in the commentary box an ecstatic Lillelien declared on Norwegian radio: "It was Tom Lund's goal."

> "We have beaten England! England, the birthplace of giants! Lord Nelson! Lord Beaverbrook! Sir Winston Churchill! Sir Anthony Eden! Clement Attlee! Henry Cooper! Lady Diana! We've beaten them all!"
>
> Norwegian commentator Bjorge Lillelien

Buoyed by having scored against the mighty England, Norway advanced again shortly after. And again, Lund was at the heart of the move.

Picking up a headed clearance from Hareide in the centre circle, and under pressure from Robson, Lund passed it wide for Albertsen – then made a run into the space just vacated by Robson. Albertsen returned the ball to Lund, who played an elegant one-touch pass on the run back out to Arne Larsen Okland on the wing. Okland's cross into the box looked non-threatening, but Terry McDermott miscalculated and deflected it straight to Thoresen. With his back to goal, Norway's captain immediately took a shot on the turn, with the ball sliding under Clemence again.

"Hallvar Thoresen! Oh my God!" shouted Lillelien. "Ullevaal is boiling! Ullevaal is boiling! We lead 2-1 over England!...This is football history!"

The game was shown live on Norwegian TV, but with 30 minutes on the clock Norway's only television channel cut away from the match to show the daily news bulletin, meaning countless Norwegians listened to the goals on the radio. Indeed, such was Lillelien's popularity that it was not uncommon for people to have the TV on mute and listen to his radio commentary during the match anyway.

In the second half, England attempted a fightback, but Norway held on, while Lillelien became increasingly frantic in the commentary booth. As local favourite Lund was hacked down from behind by Phil Neal, a furious Lillelien called Neal a "pig" and a "thug" and encouraged the Norwegian players to retaliate. As the game went into added time, Lillelien felt very strongly that the game was over and that the Polish referee Jerzy Kacprzak should blow his whistle. "The referee keeps adding and adding and adding, he is on track for an English citizenship!" he protested.

But at last, the final whistle sounded – and Lillelien went entirely overboard.

"We have beaten England! England, the birthplace of giants! Lord Nelson! Lord Beaverbrook! Sir Winston Churchill! Sir Anthony Eden! Clement Attlee! Henry Cooper! Lady Diana! We've beaten them all!" he railed. "Maggie Thatcher, can you hear me? I have a message for you, in the middle of your election campaign. I have a message for you. As they say in the boxing bars around Madison Square Garden in New York: your boys took a hell of a beating! Your boys took a hell of a beating!"

For Norway, the win was hugely significant, demonstrating that a small and developing football nation could in fact compete with the best on their day. Although, for all that euphoria, the team continued to frustrate, and it was not until 1994 that Norway qualified for their first-ever World Cup.

The defeat put Ron Greenwood's England in a perilous position in the qualifying group but, helped by results elsewhere, they just about managed to recover and qualify for the 1982 World Cup.

Lillelien, who passed away aged 60 in 1987, always insisted that nothing he said on the microphone that evening had been planned. Either way, it has become an iconic piece of commentary, not only in Norway but around the world. It has taken on a life of its own, paraphrased and parodied whenever a famous or unlikely win is achieved. But it began with Lillelien on a famous night in Oslo.

AUSTRALIA

League FOCUS

Reigning champions... Auckland FC won the 2025-26 A-League

2026-27 TEAMS

- Adelaide United
- Auckland FC
- Brisbane Roar
- Central Coast Mariners
- Macarthur FC
- Melbourne City
- Melbourne Victory
- Newcastle Jets
- Perth Glory
- Sydney FC
- Wellington Phoenix
- Western Sydney Wanderers

THE A-LEAGUE– A BRIEF HISTORY

Kicking off in August 2005, the A-League is Australia's first fully professional football league. A successor to the semi-professional National Soccer League (NSL) which ran from 1977 until 2004, the A-League initially adopted a "one city, one team" mantra.

Currently home to 12 clubs, including five from New South Wales and another two from New Zealand, efforts to expand the competition have produced mixed results. Four clubs have already folded – including 2022 champions Western United – with the clubs themselves electing to "unbundle" ownership of the competition from Football Australia through the creation of new governing body, the Australian Professional Leagues, in 2020.

THE FORMAT

The 12 clubs play a 26-round schedule consisting of home-and-away fixtures against every team, plus an extra four rounds of fixtures. The team that finishes top is dubbed the Premiers, but the champions are actually crowned via the play-offs.

The top six qualify for the end-of-season finals, with the top two going straight into the two-legged semi-finals, while positions three to six battle it out in single-leg elimination finals. Winners of the semi-finals advance to a decisive Grand Final, with the highest-ranked team earning hosting rights.

Australian sides are eligible to qualify for the AFC Champions League Elite and AFC Champions League Two through their league position, with the exception of the two New Zealand clubs Auckland FC and Wellington Phoenix. Crucially, there is no relegation or promotion.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Premiers*	*Last title*
Sydney FC	5	4	2020
Melbourne Victory	4	3	2018
Central Coast Mariners	3	3	2024
Brisbane Roar	3	2	2014
Melbourne City	2	3	2025

What happened to Western United?
In August, it was announced that Western United's licence to play in the A-League had been terminated, putting the final nail in any lingering hopes of the club being revived after missing the 2025-26 campaign.

Founded in 2019 to represent Melbourne's western suburbs and named via a newspaper poll, much of the club's appeal hinged on an announced soccer-specific stadium that was ultimately never built. The club's early games were hosted at the oval-shaped Kardinia Park in Geelong, some 75km southwest of Melbourne. Forced to share AAMI Park with Melbourne Victory and Melbourne City, it soon became clear that the long-touted stadium in Tarneit was unlikely to materialise.

Despite their struggles for an identity, they enjoyed success on the pitch. Early signings included the competition's then-record scorer Besart Berisha and the influential Alessandro Diamanti, while Socceroos legend John Aloisi led the club to an improbable 2022 title.

It all came crashing down in September 2025, when the APL "paused" the club's participation licence over mounting debts. A year-long search for a financial saviour came to nothing, with Western United ultimately joining New Zealand Knights, Gold Coast United and North Queensland Fury on the A-League scrapheap.

Could Western United be replaced by South Melbourne?
No topic conjures more heated debate than the A-League's exclusion of the country's traditional NSL heavyweights, and no question is more frequently asked than whether South Melbourne should be allowed to join the competition.

Founded in 1959 by Greek migrants, South Melbourne are four-time NSL champions and launched the careers of some of Australian football's greatest names – most notably Ange Postecoglou.

Now plying their trade in National Premier Leagues Victoria, the club are outwardly ambitious and could call upon the city's huge Greek diaspora to fill the stands at their rented Lakeside Stadium.

Co-president Bill Papastergiadis has been vocal about his desire to take over Western United's licence, while the club recently won the inaugural edition of the Australian Championship – the latest attempt to create a national second tier – and finished runners-up in the first-ever OFC Pro League.

Plenty argue that it's time to open the pyramid and allow historic clubs like South Melbourne the chance to compete.

Is the era of austerity here to stay?
The most recent round of expansion undoubtedly came at the worst possible time, with Western United's first season coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Macarthur joined a year later, securing a peppercorn rent on Campbelltown Stadium in Sydney's fast-growing south-western suburbs. Yet the Bulls averaged just over 4,000 fans to their home games in 2025-26 and that's with the likes of Sydney FC and Western Sydney Wanderers bringing their sizeable fanbases to town.

A new "hard" salary cap of AU$3m has been introduced for 2026-27, with teams permitted just one marquee player outside of those wages. Budgets have been slashed, with the APL forced to reduce the amount of centralised funding it distributes to clubs each year.

The belt-tightening has prompted an exodus of talent, with some of the competition's bigger names opting for better-paid opportunities across Asia.

Does Lucas Herrington represent the way forward?
Australia's soccer-watching public have been thrilled to see one of their own playing Premier League football after Lucas Herrington joined Hull City.

The towering defender played just 28 games for Brisbane Roar before the Queensland outfit sold him to MLS side Colorado Rapids. Their insertion of a 20% sell-on clause looked like a masterstroke when Hull paid an estimated AU$33m to sign him seven months later – until it was revealed that the Roar had sold that sell-on fee to Colorado for AU$560,000 before the World Cup, effectively depriving themselves of AU$6m.

Nevertheless, Herrington's ascent from park footballer in Toowong to starting defender for the Socceroos is a reminder the A-League still provides an effective pathway for top-tier talent. The key now is for A-League clubs to time their player sales to extract maximum value without derailing campaigns in search of a quick cash injection.

Mike Tuckerman

ONE TO WATCH

Haine EAMES

(Central Coast Mariners)

It's not every day an 18-year-old has played almost 50 games and already captained his club, but Haine Eames is no ordinary footballer. Rumoured to be on Liverpool's radar, the central midfielder scored his first A-League goal at just 16 years of age. He's already worn the captain's armband in Asia, while the technically gifted midfielder has featured regularly in Australia's national youth teams. Eames has just signed a new four-year deal to remain in Gosford for the foreseeable future, so new coach and club legend John Hutchinson will look to the teenager to step up as a leader once again despite his tender years.

Trailblazer... ex-Brisbane Roar defender Lucas Herrington

Glenn Moore

Barca begin Champions League defence

Can anyone stop the Spanish champions from winning another European crown?

Warsaw is the target as the UEFA Women's Champions League kicks off and no one will be more focused on it than Ewa Pajor, Barcelona's Polish centre-forward and the leading scorer in their triumph last season.

Pajor smashed home 11 goals in all, including two in the 4-0 drubbing of OL Lyonnes in the final in Oslo, and will spearhead much-changed Barcelona's title defence.

Four of last year's starting XI in Oslo have moved on, including Salma Paralluelo who scored the other two goals and will now play for the beaten French finalists.

Ona Batlle will also be in the competition, with Arsenal, but Alexia Putellas and Mapi Leon will be sitting out at least for this season having joined London City Lionesses.

The refresh will raise optimism among opponents that Barca, finalists in each of the last six years and winners in four of them, can be dethroned. But there's young talent aplenty coming through such as Clara Serrajordi and Vicky Lopez, plus the arrival of Brazil forward Kerolin from Manchester City.

Barcelona have maintained their competitive edge in Europe despite rarely being stretched at home, where the lack of jeopardy appears to be affecting gates and TV interest (a deal was struck at the last minute).

They have lifted the Spanish title for the past seven seasons during which time they have won 196 matches, drawn four and lost five – and some of the latter have come after the title has been secured and celebrated. But squad depth means training is of a high quality while competition for places ensures competitive intensity.

Aside from Lyonnes, the most likely teams to stop Barca's juggernaut are 2025 winners Arsenal, Chelsea and Bayern Munich, with Paris Saint-Germain and Manchester City capable of upset results but unlikely to win the competition.

These are very much the usual suspects. Barcelona, this sextet and Wolfsburg are the only teams to reach the last four in the last decade, and City haven't done so since 2018. Maybe Real Madrid or one of the Italian clubs can break into this elite but the new system – though more interesting than the old group stage – makes it much more difficult for giant-killings.

This is the second season of the Swiss format with 18 teams in one group from which the top four qualify automatically for the quarter-finals and the next eight go into play-offs.

> Four of last year's starting XI in Oslo have moved on ...which will raise optimism among opponents that Barca can be dethroned

The nature of the competition's structure means a few big names are bound to exit in the qualifying rounds. This year it was Pajor's former club Wolfsburg, two-time winners and finalists as recently as 2023. The German side, 2-0 up from the first leg, lost on penalties to Internazionale after a 3-1 defeat in the second leg.

Contenders...Chelsea's Naomi Girma after scoring against Real Sociedad in qualifying

Eintracht Frankfurt also went out, as did debutants Real Sociedad. After a 1-1 first-leg draw, Eintracht were beaten 5-1 by PSG in the second leg, and *La Real* also lost 6-2 on aggregate, to Chelsea.

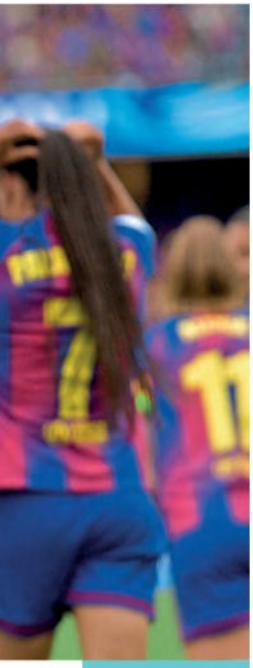
That left the final 18 consisting of three teams each from England, France and Italy, two from Spain, and seven countries with one representative including debutants Servette Chenois of Switzerland and Austria Vienna.

The latter will be thrilled by their draw with attractive ties at home to clubs from neighbouring Germany (Bayern) and Italy (Juventus and Inter) plus glamour away ties at Chelsea and Manchester City, and Benfica providing a nice trip for fans. For their part, Servette welcome Lyonnes and Paris FC to Geneva and have trips to Barcelona and Roma.

Manchester City were the danger team in Pot 3 and it was PSG and Bayern who drew them from Pot 1. Of the seeded teams, however, Arsenal were given the toughest draw on paper, facing both of last year's finalists, plus trips to Inter and Paris FC which could prove tricky.

Lyonnes' draw has risks too, with both of the London clubs plus Juventus and Inter. Nevertheless, it'll be a surprise if the majority of the usual suspects don't find their way into the last eight.

All beaten third qualifying round teams drop into the Europa League, in which Eintracht reached the semi-finals last year before Hacken won an all-Swedish final against Hammarby. Wolfsburg will be strong favourites with Frankfurt and Hammarby again contenders.



Aiming for Warsaw... Barcelona's Polish striker Ewa Pajor

Cameroon crowned queens of Africa

Indomitable Lionesses emerge from WAFCON finals in Morocco with the trophy

Cameroon's triumph in the Women's Africa Cup of Nations was a surprise, most of all because they were knocked out in qualifying by Algeria last October.

They were reprieved by CAF's decision to expand the competition from 12 teams to 16 after qualifying had been completed, with the additional four sides decided by FIFA rankings.

Outsiders rather than contenders, the Indomitable Lionesses were fortunate again in that the group-stage seeding was also determined by those rankings, resulting in a favourable group.

From then on, however, everything was gained on merit. They defeated record ten-time champions Nigeria 1-0 in the quarter-finals, hosts Morocco on penalties in the semis, and surprise packages Malawi 3-0 in the final.

While Turkey-based Marie Ngah Manga scored five goals, including two in the final, the undoubted star was goalkeeper Michaely Bihina. The 22-year-old had barely played for club side Benfica after joining in the January transfer window but looked anything but rusty, conceding only one goal in the five matches she played.

Bihina was the standout star against Nigeria and Morocco. Against the Super Falcons she made a series of superb saves and showed impeccable handling as Cameroon defended a 19th-minute lead earned by Maeva Nyadjou's stunning long-range free-kick. Against the Atlas Lionesses she saved a penalty two minutes from the end of extra-time then three of the hosts' four in the shootout, before teenager Nyadjou secured a 3-1 victory on penalties.

The final was a more straightforward affair with Cameroon two goals up before the half-hour mark. Besides the brace from Ngah Manga, who has just moved from Galatasaray to Fenerbahce, Sassuolo's Naomi Eto also scored.

While their success was unexpected, it was perhaps also overdue. Cameroon had reached ten WAFCON semi-finals before this tournament and been runners-up in 2004, 2014 and 2016, each time beaten by Nigeria. They had twice made the last 16 at the World Cup (2015, 2019).

Queens of Africa...Cameroon players celebrate with the WAFCON trophy back in Yaounde

Star player... goalkeeper Michaely Bihina with her Golden Glove award

They have been absent from the latter stages at recent WAFCONs and the 2023 World Cup, but the potential has always been there. This is a relatively young team, most of whom play outside Africa, from Mexico to Japan, Spain to Russia.

Their success was a triumph for odd-couple coaching duo of Valentine Nguele, a former Indomitable Lionesses goalkeeper, and Dimitri Lipoff, a French career coach with considerable experience in women's football. The pair, hand-picked by FECAFOOT president and legendary player Samuel Eto'o, were appointed less than two months before the tournament started. Eyebrows were further raised when some notable players were omitted from the final squad including Ajara Nchout Njoya, for so long the star player. Without the veteran forward there are no big names like Malawi's Chawinga sisters, Zambia's Barbra Banda or Nigeria's Asisat Oshoala, and until Monique Ngock's recent move to Washington Spirit, no players at elite clubs either (although Eto is on loan at Sassuolo from Paris Saint-Germain). But they were resolute and will grow in confidence with their victory.

For tournament debutants Malawi, the final was a match too far. But they had made their mark, and earned a first trip to the World Cup, with the Chawinga sisters – Kansas City Current's Temwa and OL Lyonnes' Tabitha – scoring five and four goals respectively.

Also on the rise are Algeria, who defeated Morocco on penalties in the play-off to take third place, their best WAFCON finish, and who will also make a World Cup debut in Brazil.

The hosts claimed the fourth automatic World Cup place but that was meagre consolation for a team that went unbeaten in their six matches. Morocco have now hosted three successive WAFCONs, reaching the final in the previous two.

South Africa, the 2022 winners, went out in the quarter-finals to Morocco but claimed a place, along with Ghana, in the lengthy inter-confederation play-off process.

They did so by defeating Nigeria, who will thus be absent from the World Cup for the first time. The repercussions have included the sacking of coach Justine Madugu, who led them to WAFCON success in 2024, and, after an inquiry delivered an excoriating report, the resignation of the FA president with the government promising "comprehensive reform" to correct "structural deficits within the system."

As other nations organise, and export players to Europe and the USA, Nigeria's sheer weight of talent and winning habit can no longer cover up the failings. If reform actually takes place, their ignominious WAFCON might ultimately prove beneficial.

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Europe

NICK BIDWELL

New eras begin across Europe

The 2026-27 UEFA Nations League is the start of several new managerial stints

The standout tie in the opening round of the 2026-27 UEFA Nations League must surely be the Netherlands taking on Germany in Amsterdam. More than just a head-to-head between two arch-rivals, the game marks the dawn of a brave new era for both, with fresh new coaches in each dugout.

In the visitors' corner is Jurgen Klopp, quite possibly the most eagerly anticipated managerial appointment in the history of the *Nationalelf*. The DFB, Germany's football federation, normally like to take their time with the decision-making process, yet moved with rare haste in the appointment of the iconic former Mainz, Borussia Dortmund and Liverpool coach; only 26 days separated the resignation of previous incumbent Julian Nagelsmann and Klopp's upbeat unveiling in Frankfurt.

Klopp's first game might even have been against his old foe Pep Guardiola, with the Netherlands' technical director Nigel de Jong revealing that the former Manchester City manager was their top target. Instead, they plumped for one of Guardiola's former disciples, Xavi.

A repeat of the famous showdowns between Klopp's Liverpool and Pep's City is probably too much to ask for in both men's first game, but it should be an enjoyable clash of styles nonetheless. Ex-Barcelona and Spain midfielder Xavi, the first foreigner to coach the Dutch since Austrian Ernst Happel at the 1978 World Cup final, will presumably seek to instil his vision of Total Football in the country where it all began, up against Klopp's heavy metal brand of pressing.

In a group with Greece and Serbia, both will be expected to lead their teams to the top two slots and progress to the quarter-final stage in March.

Elsewhere in the A stream, changes of coach will provide much of the mood music, with Group A1 especially full of removal vans: Zinedine Zidane taking over from Didier Deschamps in the France hot-seat, Roberto Mancini back for a second spell as Italy's supremo

New *Bundestrainer* ...Jurgen Klopp at his Germany unveiling in July

Rematch... England and Spain last met in the final of Euro 2024

and former PSV, Wolfsburg and Antwerp coach Mark van Bommel replacing Rudi Garcia as Belgium boss.

Zidane's first two matches in charge of *Les Bleus* will be tricky away trips to Turkey and Belgium in the last week of September, but the greatest excitement has been reserved for the prestigious clash with Italy at the Stade de France in early October, a sell-out within 24 hours of tickets going on sale. Expect plenty of references to Zizou's final game in a French shirt, the 2006 World Cup final in Berlin, in which he was sent off and the Italians won on penalties.

Zidane, a three-time Champions League winner as Real Madrid coach, now has the job he has always craved. On paper he has been tasked with a group of death for his first assignment but, given the rebuilding jobs required of Van Bommel and Mancini, and the unpredictability of Turkey, top spot should be well within France's reach.

Group A3 is almost an exact clone of Group A4 in the 2018-19 edition, with England, Spain and Croatia drawn together again, this time joined by a fourth team: the Czech Republic.

The group kicks off on September 26 with a veritable Clash of the Titans, the newly crowned world champions Spain meeting England at Wembley. For the hosts' boss Thomas Tuchel, it is an early opportunity to get back in the fans' good books after their sorry semi-final exit against Argentina.

Expect excitement aplenty in Group A4, where Portugal, Denmark, the revitalised Norwegians and Wales do battle. For the Portuguese, the holders of the Nations League title, the next few months will be a crucial period, the first sequence of examinations for newly installed head coach Jorge Jesus. Unlike his predecessor Roberto Martinez, Jesus is loud, brash, ever-controversial and, most important of all, far more inclined to take risks and entertain. Despite a squad of all the talents, Martinez only managed to produce a cohesive XI in fits and starts and too often seemed to prefer the pedestrian to the audacious. That should change dramatically with Jesus at the helm.

In the hot-seat...new France boss Zinedine Zidane

Of the second-tier groups, B4 featuring Sweden, Poland, Romania and Bosnia & Herzegovina appears the strongest, a quartet of evenly-matched outfits. Sweden, of course, have an affinity for this competition, well-aware that they only qualified for the last World Cup via excellent performance in the Nations League in 2024-25.

UEFA's case for the meritocracy of the Nations League is perhaps best exemplified by the upwardly mobile efforts of North Macedonia and Kosovo, both of whom have gone from fourth to second category since the Nations League came into being in 2018.

North Macedonia find themselves in a tough B1 alongside Switzerland, Scotland and Slovenia, while Kosovo have an equally difficult task in B3, where Austria, Republic of Ireland and Israel await.

Likewise, San Marino will make their League C bow after recording two wins during the 2024-25 campaign. Drawn with Albania, Finland and Belarus, anything other than six defeats would be a good return for the minnows.

Fixtures on page 98.

Group A3 kicks off on September 26 with a veritable Clash of the Titans, the newly crowned world champions Spain meeting England at Wembley

THE DRAW

LEAGUE A

GROUP A1
- France
- Italy
- Belgium
- Turkey

GROUP A2
- Germany
- Netherlands
- Serbia
- Greece

GROUP A3
- Spain
- Croatia
- England
- Czech Republic

GROUP A4
- Portugal
- Denmark
- Norway
- Wales

LEAGUE B

GROUP B1
- Scotland
- Switzerland
- Slovenia
- North Macedonia

GROUP B2
- Hungary
- Ukraine
- Georgia
- Northern Ireland

GROUP B3
- Israel
- Austria
- Republic of Ireland
- Kosovo

GROUP B4
- Poland
- Bosnia & Herzegovina
- Romania
- Sweden

LEAGUE C

GROUP C1
- Albania
- Finland
- Belarus
- San Marino

GROUP C2
- Montenegro
- Armenia
- Cyprus
- Latvia

GROUP C3
- Kazakhstan
- Slovakia
- Faroe Islands
- Moldova

GROUP C4
- Iceland
- Bulgaria
- Estonia
- Luxembourg

LEAGUE D

GROUP D1
- Gibraltar
- Malta
- Andorra

GROUP D2
- Lithuania
- Azerbaijan
- Liechtenstein

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Kicking off... Ghana will face West African rivals Ivory Coast

Preview

Ghana and Ivory Coast kick off 2027 AFCON qualifying

The road to next summer's Africa Cup of Nations finals in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania begins in September

Ghana and West African neighbours Ivory Coast have delivered some deadly clashes in the past, not least the 1993 fixture between clubs ASEC Abidjan and Asante Kotoko in the African Champions Cup semi-final that sparked riots in both countries and attacks on each other's citizenry.

The enmity has lingered long after and does add a nervy edge to the meeting between the two countries' national teams at the start of the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers. But the days of wanton violence in reaction to controversial footballing results are hopefully long gone.

Both Ghana and the Ivorians come off somewhat unfulfilling World Cup performances, reaching the last 32 but departing the tournament in North America with a sense of having missed an opportunity to go even further.

The Ivorians advanced to the knockout stages for the first time, before a last-gasp defeat to Norway, but that was not enough to save head coach Emerse Fae and he has since been replaced by Herve Renard.

The Ivorians host the opening Group C game in Abidjan in a tough return for the well-travelled Frenchman, who already has two Cup of Nations titles under his belt.

The 48 teams competing in the qualifiers are effectively chasing 21 places with co-hosts Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda guaranteed a slot at the finals, from June 19 to July 17 next year. The East African trio are all, however, entered in the preliminaries and that means from Groups D, H, and L only one other side will qualify.

In Group D, South Africa's home game against Guinea in the first round of matches is key to who will go through alongside Kenya, while Group H will see Tunisia looking to revive their reputation after a World Cup to forget. Also in

their group are Botswana, Libya and already-qualified Uganda, but Tunisia will be fancied to advance and extend their record of successive Cup of Nations qualifications to 18, stretching all the way back to 1994. Mouin Chaabani is the new Tunisian coach, returning home after a successful run with Morocco's Renaissance Berkane.

Tanzania share Group L with Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar and Nigeria. The Super Eagles were semi-finalists at the last Cup of Nations in Morocco at the start of the year, partly making up for missing out on the World Cup, and it would take a massive surprise for them to fail to go through.

In all the other groups, the top two finishers qualify for the finals, and heavyweights like Algeria, Cameroon, Egypt, Morocco and Senegal all look to have comfortable assignments.

Cape Verde, who did not make the last Cup of Nations finals but then went onto global renown with their World Cup heroics, have seen long-standing coach Bubista depart. They begin their Group K campaign away against Mali, with Liberia and Rwanda the other teams in the section, and their ageing line-up is going to be tested.

Of Africa's ten World Cup teams, only the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt and Morocco kept their coaches, though Ghana have re-hired Carlos Queiroz.

Hossam Hassan continues as head coach of Egypt and brings an outstanding Cup of Nations playing legacy along for the ride as they start against Angola and South Sudan, while Morocco's Mohamed Ouahbi impressed at the World Cup despite never having coached a senior side previously. Morocco's opening two fixtures in Group A are home to Gabon and away to Lesotho.

DR Congo's progress to a last-32 place, and going close to eliminating England, has seen several more European-born players with some Congolese heritage look to switch international allegiance and strengthen the side, which is already made up mostly of players born in Belgium or France.

Coach Sebastien Desabre is being allowed a rare third Cup of Nations cycle, having taken the team to the semi-finals in the Ivory Coast in early 2024 and the round of 16 in Morocco at the start of the year.

The Congolese begin their campaign at home to Equatorial Guinea and then play away against Zimbabwe, who might yet again be forced to take their home fixtures to neighbouring South Africa because they still have not fixed their stadia up to the required standard for hosting international matches.

The Confederation of African Football has kept up its hard stance on derelict facilities and so it can be expected that countries like Burkina Faso, Benin, Gambia, Burundi, Eritrea, Guinea, Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Namibia, Niger and Somalia will also be forced to host "home" games at neutral venues. The ongoing civil strife in Sudan means their national team can also not play at home.

Fixtures on page 99.

Under new management... Ivory Coast won the 2023 AFCON finals

Cape Verde hero ...World Cup star Vozinha has joined Chilean side Colo-Colo

THE DRAW

GROUP A
- Morocco
- Gabon
- Niger
- Lesotho

GROUP B
- Egypt
- Angola
- Malawi
- South Sudan

GROUP C
- Ivory Coast
- Ghana
- Gambia
- Somalia

GROUP D
- South Africa
- Guinea
- Kenya*
- Eritrea

GROUP E
- DR Congo
- Equatorial Guinea
- Sierra Leone
- Zimbabwe

GROUP F
- Burkina Faso
- Benin
- Mauritania
- Central African Republic

GROUP G
- Cameroon
- Comoros
- Namibia
- Congo

GROUP H
- Tunisia
- Uganda*
- Libya
- Botswana

GROUP I
- Algeria
- Zambia
- Togo
- Burundi

GROUP J
- Senegal
- Mozambique
- Sudan
- Ethiopia

GROUP K
- Mali
- Cape Verde
- Rwanda
- Liberia

GROUP L
- Nigeria
- Madagascar
- Tanzania*
- Guinea-Bissau

Qualified as co-hosts

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

5 Things...

...from North, Central America and Caribbean football

1 TOLUCA ADD LEAGUES CUP TO TROPHY COLLECTION

Toluca of Liga MX became the first Mexican team to win the Leagues Cup since the 2023 expansion of the yearly tournament featuring teams from the Mexican league and Major League Soccer.

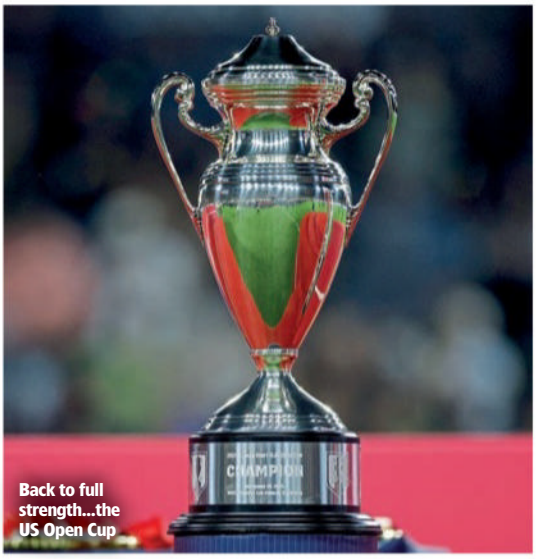
It was also the first all-Mexican final since that expansion and, in an even bigger achievement for Liga MX, the semi-finals were all-Mexican affairs too.

Though a handful of games were played in Mexico in this edition, MLS teams retained a big home advantage. But despite some good early group-stage victories for US and Canadian sides, their participation ended at the quarter-final stage.

Toluca defeated Monterrey in the final in Houston in front of a near-capacity crowd of 21,144, adding this title to the CONCACAF Champions Cup they won earlier in the year.

The victory saw Antonio Mohamed become the most successful coach in the club's history in terms of silverware won, adding these latest continental trophies to Clausura and Apertura titles in 2025, and Campeon de Campeones and Campeones Cup wins that same year.

Knockout round results on page 96.



Back to full strength...the US Open Cup

2 OPEN CUP RETURNS AMID BIG CHANGES TO US LEAGUES

In a welcome U-turn from the league, US Soccer announced that all MLS clubs will participate in the 2027 US Open Cup.

In 2023, MLS controversially announced plans to remove its teams from the nation's domestic cup, but backtracked to some extent following a backlash against the decision. Having entered only some of its teams in recent tournaments, the US top division will now return to full involvement.

This positive news comes at a time of considerable change to the landscape of US soccer.

Since launching in 1996, MLS has run seasons within the calendar year. But from the 2027-28 season, it will switch to the late summer-to-spring campaigns familiar to many top leagues.

Meanwhile, USL, the league operating divisions in the second and third tiers of American soccer, plans to create a Division One league parallel to MLS from 2028, while also implementing promotion and relegation between its three professional tiers.

Big moments for domestic US soccer.

3 COMPETITIVE NATIONS

Fresh from hosting the World Cup this summer, the lands and islands of CONCACAF are back in action this winter, as the 2026-27 Nations League gets underway.

CONCACAF is one of two confederations, along with UEFA,

Leagues Cup... Toluca became the first Mexican winners of the cup competition since its expansion in 2023

Moment to build on...Haiti's Wilson Isidor after scoring against Morocco at the World Cup

that currently run a Nations League tournament, though the Asian and African confederations also have plans to introduce their own versions.

As is the case in Europe, the format has been a success, and relatively well received as far as new tournaments go. Countries throughout the rankings getting to play competitive games that they have some chance of winning has been a positive development. It offers an opportunity for smaller Caribbean island nations, or those further down the rankings in Central America (and indeed a few from South America) to test themselves and develop their game against teams from a similar level.

4 CURACAO AND HAITI LOOK TO BUILD ON WORLD CUP

On the back of historic World Cup appearances this summer, Caribbean nations Haiti and Curacao return to League A of the Nations League for 2026-27 and get to test themselves at a high level once again.

Each of these nations, Haiti in particular, have yo-yoed between Leagues A and B in this competition, but will now be looking to establish themselves in the top tier.

Both have positives to take from the World Cup. In Haiti's case, it was Wilson Isidor's goal against Morocco, and in Curacao's, a 0-0 draw with Ecuador to earn a first-ever World Cup point.

There is plenty at stake in these games, with the tournament also determining who qualifies for the 2027 CONCACAF Gold Cup.

With Canada, Mexico and the United States, along with Panama, getting byes to the quarter-final stage as the highest-ranked teams, the focus will be on who can potentially cause an upset once the knockout rounds arrive.

Fixtures on page 98.

5 THE POCHETTINO v MARQUEZ ERA BEGINS

As has been the plan for some time, Mexico's managerial baton has been passed from Javier Aguirre to national team legend and former Barcelona defender Rafael Marquez.

The bye to the quarter-finals of the Nations League means Marquez's first games in charge will be friendlies, and the federation has arranged games against South American sides, Peru, Colombia and Chile.

The most attention, however, will be on their other friendly in this window, against the United States, where US Soccer has backed Mauricio Pochettino despite a disappointing round-of-16 exit to Belgium at the World Cup.

The Argentine signed a new deal in August that will run until 2030. It is a show of faith from the USSF, who believe sticking with their man for a full four-year cycle will lead to a better performance in 2030.

The USA will also face Canada in this window, whose coach, Jesse Marsch, continues to revel in international management.

Pochettino v Marquez...the two managers will meet on October 4 as the USA and Mexico face-off

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

5 Things...

...from Asian football

1 VIETNAM TRIUMPH BUT ASEAN CHAMPIONSHIP STARTING TO LOSE ITS SHINE

In August, Vietnam beat Thailand 4-2 in the two-legged final to win the ASEAN Hyundai Cup, Southeast Asia's ten-team biennial tournament, for a fourth time and the second time in succession. It was a vindication for the team's South Korean coach Kim Sang-sik and also another success helped by naturalisation with Brazilian-born striker Nguyen Xuan Son (formerly known as Rafaelson) who scored five goals. Thailand, record seven-time winners, came close under English coach Anthony Hudson while Singapore and Malaysia will be satisfied with making the semi-finals.

Indonesia, under John Herdman, failed to get out of the group stage, though they were missing most of their European-based stars. The Philippines were disappointing, as were the crowds. Overall attendances and interest were generally lower than a decade or so ago when the tournament was at its peak.

Full results on page 98.

2 KOREA MULLS FOLLOWING IN JAPAN'S FOOTSTEPS

It was a hot summer all around but South Korea really sweltered with the temperature not dropping below 25°C in the capital Seoul, day or night, for 17 successive days. With supporters fainting and players struggling, a players' union called for the K-League to follow the Japanese example and switch the football calendar from May-November to August-May. This would also put Korea in line with most of the world's top leagues and transfer markets as well as the Asian Champions League, which made the switch for the 2023-24 season.

Yet Korea's harsh and long winter means a switch is not straightforward. From December to February, when the temperatures are well below freezing for weeks on end, it is hard to play and miserable to watch.

It doesn't leave too many options. But if Korea does switch, China will certainly be watching closely.

Gulf Cup holders ...Bahrain won the 2025 competition

3 ARABIAN GULF CUP OFFERS PERFECT PREPARATION FOR 2027 ASIAN CUP

The 27th Arabian Gulf Cup kicked off on September 23 with eight teams taking part.

The trio that failed to win a game at the World Cup – Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Qatar – should find things a little easier

ASEAN champions... Vietnam fans celebrate their team's triumph

West v East...the AFC Champions League Elite is in need of a lift

back in the Middle East. The Gulf Cup is not as important as it once was but the Saudi Pro League is taking a break for two weeks or so as the Green Falcons look to become regional champions for the first time since 2004.

It is taking place on Saudi soil, as is the Asian Cup that starts in January, so it's a great chance to get ready on and off the pitch. Qatar are rebuilding and Iraq have extended the contract of head coach Graham Arnold. The United Arab Emirates have a point to prove after missing out on the World Cup, while Bahrain will be looking to defend their trophy. Yemen, Oman and Kuwait can also surprise.

Fixtures on page 99.

4 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE KICKS OFF IN NEED OF EXCITEMENT

For the last two seasons the AFC Champions League Elite has been won by Al Ahli, with the Saudi Arabian club helped by the fact that, from the quarter-finals onwards, all games are played in their home city of Jeddah. With all the spending, Saudi clubs would be favourites anyway but such a huge advantage makes it difficult for others, especially from the east, to compete.

A Japanese or Korean team has to fly for at least 11 hours in the middle of their season with little preparation and suddenly play in very different conditions against much wealthier teams with bigger squads and home support behind them. Interest in many parts of the continent – only 12 of the AFC's 47 members get direct access – is fading even with the presence of the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo and Sadio Mane. A return to the old home-and-away knockout stage is necessary.

5 INDIA EXCITED BY BRAZIL VISIT, BUT...

On October 3, five-time world champions Brazil will take to the field in Kolkata to face India. A sell-out crowd is expected and the hope is that Brazil, who have never faced India before, will bring a strong team, put on a good show but not win by too many. It is also to be hoped that this kind of glamorous fixture can enthuse the country that enjoyed the World Cup and is in need of some good news.

But this being India, there are also some negatives: playing this friendly means the Blue Tigers have had to withdraw from the inaugural FIFA ASEAN Cup (fixtures on page 99).

India were invited to the tournament for Southeast Asian countries, and would have had a competitive group with hosts Indonesia as well as Singapore and Malaysia, but turned it down and had their place taken by Bangladesh.

The Indian FA staved off some of the disquiet by adding more friendlies against Panama and Uruguay either side of the Brazil clash.

Time will tell whether they chose right. But having opted to walk away from a potential prize pot of around $4 million in order to shell out a six-figure sum on high-profile friendlies, the stakes are high.

Coming to India...Brazil star Vinicius Junior could play in the glamorous friendly in Kolkata in October

Fiji

STEVE MENARY

Champions once again... Auckland City lift the trophy *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

Auckland City dominate again

But this year's OFC Champions League victory doesn't come with a Club World Cup spot

Auckland City continued their domination of the OFC Champions League, winning their fifth title in a row – and 14th in total – with a 2-0 win over Central Coast of the Solomon Islands in the final. The tournament took place in Fiji over two weeks.

The game was goalless until the 69th minute, when Central Coast keeper Erick Wanega parried a shot into the path of Ryan De Vries, who finished coolly for the opener. Matthew Ellis added the second decisive goal on 81 minutes to claim the trophy for the New Zealanders – again.

The tournament was first played in 1987, but has been overshadowed by the recent launch of the OFC Pro League, which replaced the Champions League in providing Oceania's place at FIFA's Club World Cup.

Some clubs opted to rest players who had played in that competition, such as Tahiti's AS Venus, who had been finalists in 2022 but sent a younger side to Fiji. In contrast, Central Coast head coach Jacob Moli had eight players with OFC Pro League experience and ran Auckland close in their opening Group A match, losing 2-1 to a late goal from De Vries.

Both sides made the semi-finals after Central Coast beat New Caledonia's Tiga Sport 2-0 in the final decisive group game.

Group B was dominated by Galaxy's Brazilian striker Medina, who became the first player in the history of the OFC Men's Champions League to score three consecutive hat-tricks to guide Vanuatu's representatives into the semi-finals at the club's third attempt. Local side Rewa edged out Papua New Guinea's Lae City 2-1 in the final group game to take second place for the dubious privilege of facing Auckland City.

Rudy Mozr's Auckland side had never lost to a Fijian club and went into the first semi-final at Govind Park in Ba on a 30-match unbeaten run in the competition with their last defeat coming against AS Magenta in the 2019 semi-finals.

Rewa had managed to reach the knockout stages for a second time in five appearances and drawn with Auckland in the two previous editions. With Rudy Mozr's side only prevailing by a single goal in all three group games this time, Rewa player coach Tevita Waranaivalu sensed an opportunity, but key players Merrill Nand and Joseph Athale were both suspended.

Asivorosi Rabo and Don Keana were brought in but the new-look line-up took time to settle, and Spanish midfielder Gerard Garriga put Auckland ahead on 34 minutes. Centre-back Nathan Rostron added a second just before half-time and Ellis ended the game as a contest on 54 minutes with striker Josaia Sela adding a late consolation for Rewa.

The other semi-final was a re-match between Galaxy and Central Coast, who had prevailed 2-0 in a friendly between the two sides a month earlier in a friendly in Honiara.

This game was to prove a more thrilling affair with Central Coast's mercurial midfielder Raphael Lea'i, the first Solomon Islander to play in Europe in Bosnia & Herzegovina with Velez Mostar, putting his side 2-0 up.

> The tournament has been overshadowed by the recent launch of the OFC Pro League

Combining well with another Brazilian, Roberson Dos Santos Ribeiro, Medina levelled the score for Batram Suri's side, but the game went into extra-time, where Lea'i scored with three minutes remaining to clinch the first place in the final for a club from the Solomons since Koloale in 2009.

Auckland had won that two-legged final 9-4 on aggregate. Central Coast ran the Kiwis close in both games in 2026, but Auckland City's seemingly endless run goes on.

Full results on page 97.

Opening goalscorer... Auckland City's Ryan De Vries *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member states

Conference League qualifiers...Inter Club d'Escaldes of Andorra

THE DFB-POKAL'S TINIEST VILLAGE

A record was broken in the first round of the German Cup when Krieschow – located around 95km southeast of Berlin and home to only 560 inhabitants – became the smallest village to ever participate in the tournament. Local club VfB Krieschow qualified for Germany's national cup competition for the first time thanks to their performance in last season's Brandenburg Cup and were rewarded with a home tie against Bundesliga club Mainz in the first round.

Rather than relocate to nearby Cottbus, the club reinvested most of their €215,000 prize money into the temporary expansion of their modest ground. A team of 50 volunteers worked around the clock to make sure the match could go ahead at Sportpark Krieschow, whose stadium capacity was doubled to approximately 4,000 – seven times the local village population.

Asked how they planned to upset their big-name visitors, VfB Krieschow striker Andy Hebler told reporters: "Well, first they'll have a long training week and then they'll have to travel 600km to the depths of the east. We've already been joking that we'll turn the changing room temperature up to 40 degrees and leave a few mouldy bananas in there."

Sadly, the plan did not work. Krieschow lost 9-0 – but at least now hold a record that is likely to stand for some time.

KOREAN YOUTUBER'S MALAWIAN ADVENTURE

Chizumulu United, who play in Malawi's third tier, are no ordinary football club. Based on a tiny island of 5,000 people on the Mozambican side of the lake that lies between the two African countries, they face a gruelling journey to the mainland – often in a rickety wooden boat – to fulfil their away fixtures. The head coach, Mcfallen Mafuta, is a hairdresser who runs a barbershop on the island, while his assistant Mackson Thundu is a high-school PE teacher.

But it is their owner who has been making the headlines. Lee Dong-hoon, a 24-year-old Korean YouTuber and university student with a passion for niche football, became acquainted with Chizumulu United while filming on the island during a trip to Africa in 2023 and covered their registration fee for the 2025 season, which the club could not afford.

Deciding a one-off payment was unlikely to make a substantial difference, he stepped in as owner and now manages administration, sponsorships and budgeting. Since then, the club have launched their first official jersey – with a design based on the shape of Chizumulu Island and featuring the fishing nets used by local residents – and have partnered with Korean club FC Anyang. They started the season with a 3-1 win and sit third in the table at the time of writing.

MIQUELON'S FIRST FRENCH CUP QUALIFICATION

The archipelago of Saint Pierre & Miquelon is one of the nine overseas territories that enter a team into the Coupe de France. Located off the coast of Canada's Newfoundland and known for its Prohibition-era smuggling operations, it is home to only three football teams – two on the more populous island of Saint Pierre (AS Saint Pierraise and AS Ilienne Amateur), where 90% of the 5,500 inhabitants live, and one on the sparser island of Miquelon (AS Miquelonnaise).

Ever since the archipelago first participated in France's main cup competition in 2018, it has always been represented by the two Saint Pierre clubs, who have historically dominated the short qualifying tournament. But this summer AS Miquelonnaise finally triumphed, beating ASIA on penalties amid fierce winds as supporters watching in their cars behind the goal honked their horns in delight.

That result earned the Miquelon outfit a 4,000km trip to France for a third-round tie in mid-September. Clubs from the island have never beaten mainland opposition but, in the highly improbable event that one won the entire competition, they would be able to take the winner's spot in the Europa League. That is because the archipelago, unlike most other overseas territories, is not a member of another continental confederation so its representative would be free to compete in UEFA tournaments.

The Sweeper

COMING UP...

Celta Fortuna v Real Sociedad B
La Liga 2, October 11
Celta Fortuna host Real Sociedad B in a unique clash between the only reserve outfits in this season's Spanish second tier. As development teams for the senior sides, they are not eligible for promotion.

Mjallby v Inter Club d'Escaldes
Conference League, October 15
Inter d'Escaldes became the first Andorran side to reach the league phase of a UEFA club competition, and their Conference League campaign begins with a trip to Sweden's unlikely champions of 2025.

Sydney FC v Western Sydney Wanderers
A-League, 16 October
The 50th campaign of men's football in Australia kicks off with a derby. Champions Auckland FC start the defence of their title against Melbourne City the following day.

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Club Football

EUROPE

2026-27 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Aug 18-19:
Levski Sofia (Bul) 0-0 AEK Athens (Gre); Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 2-2 Viking (Nor); Fenerbahce (Tur) 1-1 Lyon (Fra); Celtic (Sco) 3-0 LASK (Aut); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1-1 Celje (Svn); Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 2-1 Sabah (Aze); NEC (Ned) 1-3 Bodo/Glimt (Nor)

Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Aug 23-26:
LASK (Aut) 5-1 Celtic (Sco) (agg 5-4, *AET*); Sabah (Aze) 5-2 Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) (agg 6-4, *AET*); Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3-0 NEC (Ned) (agg 6-1); AEK Athens (Gre) 4-0 Levski Sofia (Bul) (agg 4-0); Viking (Nor) 3-1 Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) (agg 5-3); Celje (Svn) 1-2 Slovan Bratislava (Svk) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Lyon (Fra) 1-2 Fenerbahce (Tur) (agg 2-3)

2026-27 EUROPA LEAGUE

Third Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Aug 14:
KI (Fro) 0-5 Lech Poznan (Pol) (agg 0-6)

Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Aug 20:
Trabzonspor (Tur) 0-1 Ferencvaros (Hun); Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 1-1 Ararat-Armenia (Arm); Sint-Truiden (Bel) 1-0 Omonia (Cyp); Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 3-0 Viktoria Plzen (Cze); Egnatia (Alb) 0-0 Lillestrom (Nor); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 4-0 Iberia 1999 (Geo); Mjallby (Swe) 0-1 Red Bull Salzburg (Aut); Kairat (Kaz) 0-3 Anderlecht (Bel); Lech Poznan (Pol) 7-0 Thun (Sui); Besiktas (Tur) 3-0 Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu); Benfica (Por) 3-1 AGF (Den); OFI (Gre) 3-0 CSKA Sofia (Bul)

Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Aug 27:
Ferencvaros (Hun) 4-0 Trabzonspor (Tur) (agg 5-0); Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 1-0 Universitatea Craiova (Rou) (agg 2-1); Omonia (Cyp) 4-2 Sint-Truiden (Bel) (agg 4-3); Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 5-1 Red Star Belgrade (Srb) (agg 5-4, *AET*); Lillestrom (Nor) 2-1 Egnatia (Alb) (agg 2-1, *AET*); Iberia 1999 (Geo) 1-2 Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) (agg 1-6); Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 3-0 Mjallby (Swe) (agg 4-0); Anderlecht (Bel) 3-0 Kairat (Kaz) (agg 6-0); Thun (Sui) 2-2 Lech Poznan (Pol) (agg 2-9); Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) 1-0 Besiktas (Tur) (agg 1-3); AGF (Den) 1-3 Benfica (Por) (agg 2-6); CSKA Sofia (Bul) 0-2 OFI (Gre) (agg 0-5)

2026-27 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Aug 20:
Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 1-3 Borac Banja Luka (Bih); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 1-1 KuPS (Fin); Drita (Kos) 2-2 Inter Club d'Escaldes (And); KI (Fro) 0-0 Riga (Lva); Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 0-2 Larne (Nir); Motherwell (Sco) 1-3 Freiburg (Ger); Gornik Zabrze (Pol) 2-3 Monaco (Fra); Inter Turku (Fin) 0-0 Copenhagen (Den); Hearts (Sco) 2-2 Rapid Vienna (Aut); Tromso (Nor) 0-0 Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng); Hajduk Split (Cro) 2-2 Rakow Czestochowa (Pol); Panathinaikos (Gre) 2-2 Hradec Kralove (Cze); Gent (Bel) 0-0 Hibernian (Sco); PAOK (Gre) 1-1 Brann (Nor); Atalanta (Ita) 0-0 Hapoel Tel Aviv (Isr); Midtjylland (Den) 2-0 Rijeka (Cro); Rangers (Sco) 1-0 Jablonec (Cze); Nordsjaelland (Den) 1-0 St Gallen (Sui); Dinamo City (Alb) 1-1 Pafos (Cyp); Sion (Sui) 2-4 Ajax (Ned); Braga (Por) 2-0 Austria Vienna (Aut); Twente (Ned) 0-1 Qarabag (Aze); Getafe (Spa) 3-1 Partizan Belgrade (Srb); Lugano (Sui) 2-1 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr)

Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Aug 26-27:
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2-2 Hearts (Sco) (agg 2-2, *AET, Hearts win 4-3 on pens*); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 3-1 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) (agg 6-2); KuPS (Fin) 1-0 Shamrock Rovers (Irl) (agg 2-1); Inter Club d'Escaldes (And) 0-0 Drita (Kos) (agg 2-2, *AET, Inter Club d'Escaldes win 4-2 on pens*); Riga (Lva) 2-1 KI (Fro) (agg 2-1); Larne (Nir) 0-3 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Freiburg (Ger) 4-1 Motherwell (Sco) (agg 7-2); Monaco (Fra) 4-1 Gornik Zabrze (Pol) (agg 7-3); Copenhagen (Den) 4-1 Inter Turku (Fin) (agg 4-1); Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng) 4-0 Tromso (Nor) (agg 4-0); Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 2-3 Hajduk Split (Cro) (agg 4-5, *AET*); Hradec Kralove (Cze) 1-2 Panathinaikos (Gre) (agg 3-4, *AET*); Hibernian (Sco) 2-3 Gent (Bel) (agg 2-3); Brann (Nor) 3-2 PAOK (Gre) (agg 4-3); Hapoel Tel Aviv (Isr) 0-1 Atalanta (Ita) (agg 0-1); Rijeka (Cro) 1-4 Midtjylland (Den) (agg 1-6); Jablonec (Cze) 1-0 Rangers (Sco) (agg 1-1, *AET, Jablonec win 4-3 on pens*); St Gallen (Sui) 2-3 Nordsjaelland (Den) (agg 2-4); Pafos (Cyp) 4-2 Dinamo City (Alb) (agg 5-3, *AET*); Ajax (Ned) 5-3 Sion (Sui) (agg 9-5); Austria Vienna (Aut) 0-0 Braga (Por) (agg 0-2); Qarabag (Aze) 1-4 Twente (Ned) (agg 2-4, *AET*); Partizan Belgrade (Srb) 2-1 Getafe (Spa) (agg 3-4); Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 1-1 Lugano (Sui) (agg 2-3)

2026 COMMUNITY SHIELD

Aug 16 – Cardiff
Arsenal 3 (Calafiori 1, Havertz 28, Odegaard 48)
Manchester City 0

2026 FRENCH SUPER CUP

Aug 16 – Lens
Lens 1 (Thauvin 32)
Paris Saint-Germain 0

2026 GERMAN SUPER CUP

Aug 22 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund 1 (Silva 75)
Bayern Munich 2 (Brown 28, Olise 45+1)

SOUTH AMERICA

2026 COPA LIBERTADORES

Round of 16 – 1st Leg

Aug 18 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 0
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Rodriguez 11)

Round of 16 – 2nd Leg

Aug 18 – Santiago
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 0
Estudiantes (Arg) 3 (Correa 44, Carrillo 53, 83)
Estudiantes win 4-1 on aggregate

Aug 18– Mendoza
Independiente Rivadavia (Arg) 1 (Arce 90+7 pen)
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Serna 75)
1-1 on aggregate; Fluminense win 5-4 on pens

Aug 19 – Rio deJaneiro
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (De Arrascaeta 35, Lino 62)
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Romero 51)
Flamengo win 3-2 on aggregate

Aug 19 – Coquimbo
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 0
Platense (Arg) 0
1-1 on aggregate; Platense win 7-6 on pens

Aug 19 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Gomez 41)
Palmeiras win 2-1 on aggregate

Aug 20 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 0
Mirassol (Bra) 0
1-1 on aggregate; LDU Quito win 5-4 on pens

Aug 20 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Bidon 80)
Rosario Central (Arg) 0
Corinthians win 1-0 on aggregate

Aug 25 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 3 (Romero 59, Gonzalez 70, Perello 90+5)
Tolima (Col) 1 (Hernandez 84)
Independiente del Valle win 4-1 on aggregate

2026 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Round of 16 –1st Leg

Aug 19 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) 0
River Plate (Arg) 0

Round of 16 – 2nd Leg

Aug 18 – Asuncion
Recoleta (Par) 0
Boca Juniors (Arg) 4 (Ascacibar 30, Villa 43, Merentiel 52, Velasco 77)
River Plate win 7-1 on aggregate

Aug 18 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 3 (Luciano 18, Calleri 68 pen, Sabino 76)
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Asprilla 61)
Sao Paulo win 4-2 on aggregate

Aug 19 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2 (Maycon 52, Cuello 90+3)
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 2 (Ramires 45+8, Sasha 81)
Atletico Mineiro win 3-2 on aggregate

Aug 19 – Montevideo
Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 2 (Rodriguez 39, 45+4)
Tigre (Arg) 1 (Moreno 41)
Montevideo City Torque win 3-1 on aggregate

Aug 20 – Rio deJaneiro
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Danilo Pereira 8)
Cienciano (Per) 0
Cienciano win 6-2 on aggregate

Aug 20 – Asuncion
Olimpia (Par) 1 (Matus 15)
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 4 (Thiago Mendes 29, David 36, Adson 70, Spinelli 84)
Vasco da Gama win 4-1 on aggregate

Aug 20 – Ambato
Macara (Ecu) 0
Santos (Bra) 0
Santos win 2-1 on aggregate

Aug 26 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Driussi 52)
Santa Fe (Col) 1 (Fagundez 80 pen)
1-1 on aggregate; Santa Fe win 8-7 on pens

CONCACAF

2026 LEAGUES CUP

Quarter-Finals

Aug 25 – Chicago
Monterrey (Mex) 2 (Guzman 45+4, Pineda 83)
Chicago Fire (USA) 1 (Zinckernagel 59)

Aug 25 – Commerce City
Leon (Mex) 3 (Cambindo 21, 72, Vegas 66)
Real Salt Lake (USA) 0

Aug 26 – Harrison
Toluca (Mex) 2 (Helinho 53 pen, Diaz Price 90+7)
Austin FC (USA) 0

Aug 26 – Carson
America (Mex) 2 (Veiga 11, Rodriguez 45+6)
Columbus Crew (USA) 0

Semi-Finals

Sep 2 – Houston
Leon (Mex) 0
Toluca (Mex) 2 (Pereira 41, Vinas 69)

Sep 2 – Carson
Monterrey (Mex) 2 (Rossi 49, Ocampos 69 pen)
America (Mex) 2 (Juarez 57, Cervantes 63)
Monterrey win 5-4 on pens

Third Place Play-Off

Sep 6 – Houston
Leon (Mex) 1 (Cambindo 80)
America (Mex) 0

Finals

Sep 6 – Houston
Toluca (Mex) 2 (Vega 4, Helinho 70)
Monterrey (Mex) 0

2026 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

Group A

Aug 4-6:
Violette (Hai) 3–0 Defence Force (Tri); Club Sando (Tri) 2–1 Broki (Sur)
Aug 19-20:
Delfines del Este (Dom) 0–1 Violette (Hai); Defence Force (Tri) 2–1 Broki (Sur)
Sep 1-2:
Defence Force (Tri) 0-2 Club Sando (Tri); Broki (Sur) 0-0 Delfines del Este (Dom)
Sep 8-9:
Club Sando (Tri) 0-0 Delfines del Este (Dom); Broki (Sur) 1-2 Violette (Hai)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Violette	3	3	0	0	6	1	9
Club Sando	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Defence Force	3	1	0	2	2	6	3
Delfines del Este	3	0	2	1	0	1	2
Broki	4	0	1	3	3	6	1

Group B

Aug 4-5:
Portmore United (Jam) 1–2 Salcedo (Dom); Cibao (Dom) 0–0 Cavalier (Jam)
Aug 18-20:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 1–2 Cibao (Dom); Cavalier (Jam) 0–0 Salcedo (Dom)
Sep 2-3:
Salcedo (Dom) 1-1 Mount Pleasant (Jam); Cavalier (Jam) 0-2 Portmore United (Jam)
Sep 9-10:
Portmore United (Jam) 0-1 Mount Pleasant (Jam); Salcedo (Dom) 1-1 Cibao (Dom)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Salcedo	4	1	3	0	4	3	6
Cibao	3	1	2	0	3	2	5
Mount Pleasant	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Portmore Utd	3	1	0	2	3	3	3
Cavalier	3	0	2	1	0	2	2

2026 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Group A

Aug 18-20:
Xelaju (Gua) 2-0 Diriangen (Nca);
Firpo (Slv) 1-0 Alajuelense (Crc)
Aug 26:
Alajuelense (Crc) 3-1 Plaza Amador (Pan);
Xelaju (Gua) 1-1 Firpo (Slv)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alajuelense*	4	3	0	1	7	3	9
Firpo*	4	2	1	1	7	3	7
Plaza Amador	4	2	0	2	10	10	6
Xelaju	4	1	1	2	5	7	4
Diriangen	4	1	0	3	5	11	3

*Advance to next stage

Group B

Aug 18-19:
Real Esteli (Nca) 0-2 Herediano (Crc);
Marathon (Hon) 0-1 Alianza (Slv)
Aug 26:
Herediano (Crc) 2-1 Antigua (Gua);
Marathon (Hon) 3-0 Real Esteli (Nca)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alianza*	4	3	0	1	5	4	9
Marathon*	4	2	1	1	6	1	7
Herediano	4	2	1	1	4	2	7
Real Esteli	4	2	0	2	5	6	6
Antigua	4	0	0	4	2	9	0

*Advance to next stage

Group C

Aug 19-20:
Mixco (Gua) 4-1 UMECIT (Pan);
Alianza FC (Pan) 1-3 Olimpia (Hon)
Aug 27:
Olimpia (Hon) 2-1 Saprissa (Crc);
Mixco (Gua) 2-0 Alianza FC (Pan)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olimpia*	4	4	0	0	9	3	12
Saprissa*	4	3	0	1	8	4	9
Mixco	4	2	0	2	6	6	6
Alianza FC	4	1	0	3	3	7	3
UMECIT	4	0	0	4	3	9	0

*Advance to next stage

Group D

Aug 18-19:
Cartagines (Crc) 4-0 Verdes (Blz);
FAS (Slv) 1-1 Municipal (Gua)
Aug 25:
Municipal (Gua) 1-1 Motagua (Hon);
Cartagines (Crc) 2-0 FAS (Slv)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cartagines*	4	2	2	0	8	2	8
Motagua*	4	2	2	0	8	2	8
Municipal	4	1	3	0	4	3	6
FAS	4	1	1	2	5	5	4
Verdes	4	0	0	4	1	14	0

*Advance to next stage

OCEANIA

2026 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Aug 10 – Lautoka
Venus (Tah) 0
Tiga Sport (Ncl) 1 (Saiko 89)

Aug 10 – Lautoka
Central Coast (Sol) 1 (Leslie 58)
Auckland City (Nzl) 2 (Garriga 78, De Vries 80)

Aug 13 – Lautoka
Tiga Sport (Ncl) 0
Auckland City (Nzl) 1 (Ilich 85)

Aug 13 – Lautoka
Central Coast (Sol) 3 (Limoki 8, Lea'i 19, Leslie 24)
Venus (Tah) 0

Aug 16 – Ba
Auckland City (Nzl) 4 (Doudera 45, Gray 54, Watson 84, Ellis 90)
Venus (Tah) 3 (Kaiha 6, Lacan 26, Haewegene 77)

Aug 16 – Ba
Tiga Sport (Ncl) 0
Central Coast (Sol) 2 (Wae 15, Tahioa 72)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland City*	3	3	0	0	7	4	9
Central Coast*	3	2	0	1	6	2	6
Tiga Sport	3	1	0	2	1	3	3
Venus	3	0	0	3	3	8	0

*Advance to next stage

Group B

Aug 9 – Lautoka
Lae City (Png) 4 (Kamake 17, Tuteru 43 og, Moses 52, Api 90+2)
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 1 (Rimene-Albrett 72)

Aug 9 – Lautoka
Galaxy (Van) 4 (Malakai 4, Medina 45, 52, 86 pen)
Rewa (Fij) 1 (Matanisiga 58)

Aug 12 – Ba
Rewa (Fij) 4 (Khan 40, Athale 48, Hughes 67, Sela 85)
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 2 (Rimene-Albrett 47, Maraetefau 90+4)

Aug 12 – Ba
Lae City (Png) 1 (Hayes 13)
Galaxy (Van) 3 (Medina 40, 69, 70)

Aug 15 – Ba
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 1 (Rimene-Albrett 88)
Galaxy (Van) 7 (Viliamu 25 og, Moses 41, Medina 47, 55, 70, Roberson 49, Soksok 90+1)

Aug 15 – Ba
Rewa (Fij) 2 (Rawaqa 45, Nand 52)
Lae City (Png) 1 (Rudolf 15)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Galaxy*	3	3	0	0	14	3	9
Rewa*	3	2	0	1	7	7	6
Lae City	3	1	0	2	6	6	3
Tupapa Maraerenga	3	0	0	3	4	15	0

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Finals

Aug 19 – Ba
Auckland City (Nzl) 3 (Garriga 34, Rostron 45, Ellis 54)
Rewa (Fij) 1 (Sela 89)

Aug 19 – Ba
Galaxy (Van) 2 (Medina 69, 77)
Central Coast (Sol) 3 (Lea'i 15, 44, 117)
After Extra-Time

Final

Aug 22 – Ba
Auckland City (Nzl) 2 (De Vries 69, Ellis 81)
Central Coast (Sol) 0

Final Table 2025-26

FIJI	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ba (C)	18	13	3	2	54	14	42
Labasa	18	11	5	2	44	21	38
Rewa	18	10	2	6	39	17	32
Lautoka	18	7	5	6	37	35	26
Navua	18	7	4	7	25	23	25
Suva	18	6	5	7	38	28	23
Nadi	18	6	3	9	25	29	21
Nasinu	18	6	3	9	27	42	21
Nadroga	18	3	4	11	22	50	13
Tailevu/Naitasiri (R)	18	2	4	12	20	72	10

ASIA

2026-27 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

League Stage Draw

West Region

Al Ahli (KSA), Al Ittihad (KSA), Al Nassr (KSA), Al Hilal (KSA), Al Qadsiah (KSA), Al Ain (UAE), Al Wasl (UAE), Shabab Al Ahli (UAE), Al Gharafa (Qat), Al Sadd (Qat), Al Shamal (Qat), Esteghlal (Irn), Tractor (Irn), Neftchi (Uzb), Pakhtakor (Uzb), Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq)

• *West region league stage takes place September 14, 2026-February 15, 2027*

East Region

Gamba Osaka (Jpn), Kashima Antlers (Jpn), Kashiwa Reysol (Jpn), Kyoto Sanga (Jpn), Vissel Kobe (Jpn), Daejeon Hana Citizen (Kor), Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor), Pohang Steelers (Kor), Buriram United (Tha), Port (Tha), Ratchaburi (Tha), Beijing Guoan (Chn), Shanghai Port (Chn), Newcastle Jets (Aus), Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas), Cong An Hanoi (Vie)

• *East region league stage takes place September 15, 2026-February 16, 2027*

2026-27 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Group Stage Draw

West Region

Group A

Al Wahda (UAE), Nasaf (Uzb), Al Kuwait (Kuw), Al Khaldiya (Bhr)

Group B

Al Jazira (UAE), Gol Gohar (Irn), Al Muharraq (Bhr), Arkadag (Tkm)

Group C

Al Taawoun (KSA), Al Rayyan (Qat), Al Faisaly (Jor), Al Nahda (Oma)

Group D

Al Hussein (Jor), Al Shorta (Irq), Al Seeb (Oma), East Bengal (Ind)

• *West region group stage takes place September 15-December 9*

East Region

Qualifying Play-Off

Aug 31:
Persib Bandung (Idn) 1-0 Manila Digger (Phi)

Group Stage Draw

Group E

FC Seoul (Kor), Melbourne Victory (Aus), The Cong–Viettel (Vie), Persib Bandung (Idn)

Group F

Adelaide United (Aus), BG Pathum United (Tha), Lion City Sailors (Sgp), Tai Po (Hkg)

Group G

Machida Zelvia (Jpn), Shanghai Shenhua (Chn), Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam), Tampines Rovers (Sgp)

Group H

Gangwon FC (Kor), Kuching City (Mas), Kitchee (Hkg), Phnom Penh Crown (Cam)

• *East region group stage takes place September 16-December 3*

2026-27 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

Group Stage Draw

West Region

Group A

Ahal (Tkm), Ansar (Lbn), Al Ittihad Ahli (Syr), Paro (Bhu)

Group B

Al Arabi (Kuw), Nejmeh (Lbn), Istiklol (Tjk), Homs Al Fidaa (Syr)

Group C

Goa (Ind), Al Qadsia (Kuw), Fortis (Ban), Regar-TadAZ (Tjk)

• *West region group stage takes place October 17-23*

East Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Sep 8: Yangon United (Mya) 2-1 Ezra (Lao)
Sep 15: Kasuka (Bru) v Karketu Dili (Tls)

Group Stage Draw

Group D

Borneo (Idn), One Taguig (Phi), Tainan City (Tpe), Yangon United (Mya)

Group E

Manila Digger (Phi), Shan United (Mya), Hang Yuan (Tpe), Kasuka (Bru)/Karketu Dili (Tls)

• *East region group stage takes place September 18-24*

Final Table 2025-26

MACAO	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shao Jiang (C)	18	15	2	1	90	16	47
Must IPO	18	14	2	2	86	14	44
Gala	18	12	2	4	52	28	38
Chiba	18	8	4	6	44	33	28
Benfica of Macau	18	7	3	8	48	46	24
Sunco G Universe	18	7	2	9	49	70	23
Ching Fung	18	5	7	6	31	38	22
Hang Sai	18	4	4	10	38	48	16
Os Artilheiros (R)	18	3	3	12	25	98	12
University of Macau (R)	18	0	1	17	15	87	1

AFRICA

Final Table 2025-26

SOMALIA	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gaadiidka (C)	22	15	6	1	57	16	51
Heegan	22	15	5	2	54	16	50
Dekedda	22	12	8	2	51	23	44
Mogadishu City	22	12	6	4	41	18	42
Horseed	22	11	8	3	44	21	41
Elman	22	12	3	7	39	18	39
Jeenyo	22	6	8	8	37	30	26
Badbadoo	22	8	2	12	46	40	26
Jazeera	22	5	5	12	38	51	20
Raadsan	22	5	2	15	39	61	17
Gantaalaha (R)	22	2	1	19	28	101	7
Jubba (R)	22	2	0	20	17	96	6

Internationals

2026 ASEAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Group A

Jul 24 – Phnom Penh
Cambodia 1 (Sovann 55)
Singapore 2 (Shawal 22, Ilhan 90+11)

Jul 24 – Chonburi
Timor Leste 0
Vietnam 7 (Do Hoang Hen 7, 41, Nguyen Dinh Bac 31, 42, 65, Nguyen Xuan Son 45+1, Nguyen Quang Hai 79)

Jul 27 – Kallang
Singapore 2 (Ilhan 41, Song Ui-young 56)
Timor Leste 0

Jul 27 – Bogor
Indonesia 5 (Baker 6, 15, 56, Walsh 24, Raven 86)
Cambodia 1 (Sokmeng 48)

Jul 31 – Chonburi
Timor Leste 0
Indonesia 3 (Pattynama 74, Haye 78, Baker 81)

Jul 31 – Hanoi
Vietnam 0
Singapore 0

Aug 3 – Phnom Penh
Cambodia 3 (Soknet 16, 63, Rado 90)
Timor Leste 0

Aug 3 – Bogor
Indonesia 0
Vietnam 3 (Nguyen Van Vi 6, Nguyen Hai Long 14, Nguyen Xuan Son 71)

Aug 7 – Hanoi
Vietnam 3 (Nguyen Dinh Bac 18, 89, Vakhim 84 og)
Cambodia 1 (Bento 71)

Aug 7 – Kallang
Singapore 1 (Ilhan 66)
Indonesia 1 (Oratmangoen 47)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vietnam*	4	3	1	0	13	1	10
Singapore*	4	2	2	0	5	2	8
Indonesia	4	2	1	1	9	5	7
Cambodia	4	1	0	3	6	10	3
Timor-Leste	4	0	0	4	0	15	0

*Advance to next stage

Group B

Jul 25 – Yangon
Myanmar 1 (Myat Kaung Khant 10)
Malaysia 2 (Paulo Josue 52, 57 pen)

Jul 25 – Vientiane
Laos 0
Thailand 5 (Teerasak 11, Kakana 27, 59, Yotsakorn 49, Sarach 52)

Jul 28 – Capas
Philippines 1 (Gayoso 68)
Myanmar 4 (Kyaw Min Oo 7, Than Paing 28, 83, Win Naing Tun 81)

Jul 28 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 4 (Paulo Josue 45, Endrick 57, Viengxay 66 og, Wan Kuzain 84)
Laos 0

Aug 1 – Vientiane
Laos 1 (Damoth 7)
Philippines 4 (Lucero 47, Viengxay 52 og, Gayoso 60 pen, Sato 88)

Aug 1 – Bangkok
Thailand 2 (Yotsakorn 38 pen, Teerasak 56)
Malaysia 0

Aug 4 – Yangon
Myanmar 7 (Lwin Moe Aung 2, Win Naing Tun 20, 41, 83, Maung Maung Lwin 45+6 pen, Than Paing 52, Hein Htet Aung 81)
Laos 2 (Bounchay 17, Phoutthavong 23)

Aug 4 – Capas
Philippines 0
Thailand 1 (Waris 84)

Aug 8 – Bangkok
Thailand 2 (Worachit 11 pen, Jehhanafee 52 pen)
Myanmar 0

Aug 8 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 1 (Pavithran 16)
Philippines 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Thailand*	4	4	0	0	10	0	12
Malaysia*	4	3	0	1	7	3	9
Myanmar	4	2	0	2	12	7	6
Philippines	4	1	0	3	5	7	3
Laos	4	0	0	4	3	20	0

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Aug 15 – Kallang
Singapore 1 (Ilhan 84)
Thailand 3 (Teerasak 13, 26, Seksan 51)

Aug 16 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 0
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Xuan Son 45+5, Faris 86 og)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Aug 18 – Bangkok
Thailand 1 (Kakana 61 pen)
Singapore 2 (H. Stewart 45, Pansa 65 og)
Thailand win 4-3 on aggregate

Aug 19 – Hanoi
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Xuan Son 62, 89)
Malaysia 0
Vietnam win 4-0 on aggregate

Final – 1st Leg

Aug 22 – Bangkok
Thailand 0
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Hai Long 62, Nguyen Quang Hai 69)

Final – 2nd Leg

Aug 24 – Hanoi
Vietnam 2 (Chatchai 52 og, Wanchai 90+3 og)
Thailand 2 (Yotsakorn 12, Wanchai 85)
Vietnam win 4-2 on aggregate

2026-27 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Group A1

Sep 25:
Italy v Belgium; Turkey v France
Sep 28:
Belgium v France; Turkey v Italy
Oct 2:
Belgium v Turkey; France v Italy
Oct 5:
France v Belgium; Italy v Turkey

Group A2

Sep 24:
Netherlands v Germany; Serbia v Greece
Sep 27:
Serbia v Netherlands; Germany v Greece
Oct 1:
Germany v Serbia; Greece v Netherlands
Oct 4:
Greece v Germany; Netherlands v Serbia

Group A3

Sep 26:
Czech Republic v Croatia; England v Spain
Sep 29:
Czech Republic v England; Spain v Croatia
Oct 3:
Croatia v England; Spain v Czech Republic
Oct 6:
Croatia v Spain; England v Czech Republic

Group A4

Sep 24:
Norway v Denmark; Portugal v Wales
Sep 27:
Denmark v Wales; Norway v Portugal
Oct 1:
Denmark v Portugal; Wales v Norway
Oct 4:
Portugal v Norway; Wales v Denmark

League B

Group B1

Sep 26:
Slovenia v Scotland; North Macedonia Switzerland
Sep 29:
Scotland v Switzerland; Slovenia v North Macedonia
Oct 3:
North Macedonia v Scotland; Switzerland v Slovenia
Oct 6:
Scotland v Slovenia; Switzerland v North Macedonia

Group B2

Sep 25:
Georgia v Northern Ireland; Hungary v Ukraine
Sep 28:
Georgia v Ukraine; Northern Ireland v Hungary
Oct 2:
Hungary v Georgia; Ukraine v Northern Ireland
Oct 5:
Northern Ireland v Georgia; Ukraine v Hungary

Group B3

Sep 24:
Austria v Israel; Kosovo v Republic of Ireland
Sep 27:
Austria v Kosovo; Israel v Republic of Ireland
Oct 1:
Israel v Kosovo; Republic of Ireland v Austria
Oct 4:
Kosovo v Austria; Republic of Ireland v Israel

Group B4

Sep 25:
Poland v Bosnia & Herzegovina; Sweden v Romania
Sep 28:
Romania v Bosnia & Herzegovina; Sweden v Poland
Oct 2:
Bosnia & Herzegovina v Sweden; Poland v Romania
Oct 5:
Bosnia & Herzegovina v Poland; Romania v Sweden

League C

Group C1

Sep 26:
San Marino v Finland; Albania v Belarus
Sep 29:
Finland v Belarus; San Marino v Albania
Oct 3:
Finland v Albania; Belarus v San Marino
Oct 6:
Albania v San Marino; Belarus v Finland

Group C2

Sep 25:
Armenia v Latvia; Montenegro v Cyprus
Sep 28:
Armenia v Montenegro; Latvia v Cyprus
Oct 2:
Cyprus v Armenia; Latvia v Montenegro
Oct 5:
Cyprus v Latvia; Montenegro v Armenia

Group C3

Sep 26:
Faroe Islands v Kazakhstan; Slovakia v Moldova
Sep 29:
Moldova v Faroe Islands; Slovakia v Kazakhstan
Oct 2:
Kazakhstan v Moldova; Faroe Islands v Slovakia
Oct 6:
Kazakhstan v Faroe Islands; Moldova v Slovakia

Group C4

Sep 26:
Bulgaria v Luxembourg; Iceland v Estonia
Sep 29:
Bulgaria v Estonia; Luxembourg v Iceland
Oct 3:
Estonia v Luxembourg; Iceland v Bulgaria
Oct 6:
Estonia v Iceland; Luxembourg v Bulgaria

League D

Group D1

Sep 24:
Andorra v Malta
Sep 27:
Gibraltar v Andorra
Oct 1:
Malta v Gibraltar
Oct 4:
Malta v Andorra

Group D2

Sep 24:
Liechtenstein v Lithuania
Sep 27:
Lithuania v Azerbaijan
Oct 1:
Azerbaijan v Liechtenstein
Oct 4:
Azerbaijan v Lithuania

2026-27 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Group A

Sep 24:
Dominican Republic v Nicaragua; Haiti v Trinidad & Tobago; Costa Rica v Curacao
Sep 27:
Haiti v Costa Rica; Curacao v Nicaragua; Trinidad & Tobago v Dominican Republic
Oct 1:
Curacao v Trinidad & Tobago; Dominican Republic v Haiti; Nicaragua v Costa Rica
Oct 4:
Trinidad & Tobago v Curacao; Costa Rica v Haiti; Nicaragua v Dominican Republic

Group B

Sep 25:
Jamaica v Guatemala; Honduras v Suriname; El Salvador v Martinique
Sep 28:
Suriname v Martinique; Jamaica v Honduras; Guatemala v El Salvador
Oct 2:
Suriname v Guatemala; Martinique v Honduras; El Salvador v Jamaica
Oct 5:
Martinique v El Salvador; Guatemala v Suriname; Honduras v Jamaica

League B

Group A

Sep 24:
Puerto Rico v Guyana; Cayman Islands v Dominica
Sep 27:
Guyana v Cayman Islands; Dominica v Puerto Rico
Oct 1:
Dominica v Guyana; Cayman Islands v Puerto Rico
Oct 4:
Guyana v Dominica; Puerto Rico v Cayman Islands

Group B

Sep 25:
Bermuda v Guadeloupe; Barbados v St Lucia

Sep 28:
Guadeloupe v Barbados; St Lucia v Bermuda
Oct 2:
St Lucia v Guadeloupe; Barbados v Bermuda
Oct 5:
Guadeloupe v St Lucia; Bermuda v Barbados

Group C

Sep 25:
Grenada v Cuba; Bonaire v St Kitts & Nevis
Sep 28:
Cuba v Bonaire; St Kitts & Nevis v Grenada
Oct 2:
St Kitts & Nevis v Cuba; Bonaire v Grenada
Oct 5:
Cuba v St Kitts & Nevis; Grenada v Bonaire

Group D

Sep 26:
St Vincent & Grenadines v French Guiana; Sint Maarten v Belize
Sep 29:
French Guiana v Sint Maarten; Belize v St Vincent & Grenadines
Oct 3:
Sint Maarten v St Vincent & Grenadines; Belize v French Guiana
Oct 6:
St Vincent & Grenadines v Sint Maarten; French Guiana v Belize

League C

Group A

Sep 23:
Turks & Caicos v Montserrat
Sep 26:
Montserrat v British Virgin Islands
Sep 29:
British Virgin Islands v Turks & Caicos
Oct 1:
British Virgin Islands v Montserrat
Oct 4:
Turks & Caicos v British Virgin Islands
Oct 6:
Montserrat v Turks & Caicos

Group B

Sep 23:
Aruba v Antigua & Barbuda
Sep 26:
Antigua & Barbuda v Anguilla
Sep 29:
Anguilla v Aruba
Oct 1:
Anguilla v Antigua & Barbuda
Oct 4:
Aruba v Anguilla
Oct 6:
Antigua & Barbuda v Aruba

Group C

Sep 23:
Bahamas v St Martin
Sep 26:
St Martin v US Virgin Islands
Sep 29:
US Virgin Islands v Bahamas
Oct 1:
US Virgin Islands v St Martin
Oct 4:
Bahamas v US Virgin Islands
Oct 6:
St Martin v Bahamas

2027 AFCON QUALIFIERS

Group A

Sep 23-25:
Niger v Lesotho; Morocco v Gabon
Sep 27-29:
Gabon v Niger; Lesotho v Morocco

Group B

Sep 23:
Egypt v Angola; Malawi v South Sudan
Sep 27:
Angola v Malawi; South Sudan v Egypt

Group C

Sep 23:
Gambia v Somalia; Ivory Coast v Ghana
Sep 27:
Ghana v Gambia; Somalia v Ivory Coast

Group D

Sep 23:
Kenya v Eritrea; South Africa v Guinea
Sep 27:
Eritrea v South Africa; Guinea v Kenya

Group E

Sep 23:
DR Congo v Equatorial Guinea; Sierra Leone v Zimbabwe
Sep 27:
Equatorial Guinea v Sierra Leone; Zimbabwe v DR Congo

Group F

Sep 23:
Burkina Faso v Benin; Mauritania v Central African Republic
Sep 27:
Benin v Mauritania; Central African Republic v Burkina Faso

Group G

Sep 23:
Cameroon v Comoros; Namibia v Congo
Sep 27:
Comoros v Namibia; Congo v Cameroon

Group H

Sep 23:
Libya v Botswana; Tunisia v Uganda
Sep 27:
Botswana v Tunisia; Uganda v Libya

Group I

Sep 23:
Algeria v Zambia; Togo v Burundi
Sep 27:
Burundi v Algeria; Zambia v Togo

Group J

Sep 23:
Senegal v Mozambique; Sudan v Ethiopia
Sep 27:
Ethiopia v Senegal; Mozambique v Sudan

Group K

Sep 23:
Mali v Cape Verde; Rwanda v Liberia
Sep 27:
Cape Verde v Rwanda; Liberia v Mali

Group L

Sep 23:
Nigeria v Madagascar; Tanzania v Guinea-Bissau
Sep 27:
Guinea-Bissau v Nigeria; Madagascar v Tanzania

2026 FIFA ASEAN CUP

Premier Division

Group A

Sep 25:
Bangladesh v Malaysia; Indonesia v Singapore
Sep 28:
Singapore v Bangladesh; Indonesia v Malaysia
Oct 1:
Indonesia v Bangladesh; Malaysia v Singapore

Group B

Sep 26:
Pakistan v Thailand; Vietnam v Philippines
Sep 29:
Philippines v Pakistan; Thailand v Vietnam
Oct 2:
Thailand v Philippines; Vietnam v Pakistan

Challenge Division

Group A

Sep 24:
Laos v Brunei
Sep 27:
Hong Kong v Laos
Sep 30:
Hong Kong v Brunei

Group B

Sep 24:
Myanmar v Timor Leste
Sep 27:
Cambodia v Myanmar
Sep 30:
Timor Leste v Myanmar

• *Finals take place October 3-5*

27TH ARABIAN GULF CUP

Group A

Sep 23:
Iraq v Oman; Saudi Arabia v Kuwait
Sep 26:
Kuwait v Iraq; Oman v Saudi Arabia
Sep 29:
Saudi Arabia v Iraq; Oman v Kuwait

Group B

Sep 24:
United Arab Emirates v Yemen; Qatar v Bahrain
Sep 27:
Yemen v Qatar; Bahrain v United Arab Emirates
Sep 30:
United Arab Emirates v Qatar; Bahrain v Yemen

• *Knockout rounds take place October 3-6*

FRIENDLIES

Jul 18 – Thai Nguyen
Vietnam 4 (Nguyen Xuan Son 5, Pham Xuan Manh 39, Do Hoang Hen 59, Nguyen Dinh Bac 90+1 pen)
Myanmar 0

Fixtures

Sep 23:
Azerbaijan v Tajikistan
Sep 24:
Uzbekistan v Iran; Japan v Uruguay; South Korea v Ecuador; China v Palestine
Sep 25:
Australia v Brazil
Sep 26:
Mexico v Colombia; India v Panama; Bolivia v Paraguay; United States v Peru
Sep 27:
Canada v Chile; China v New Zealand; Malta v Liechtenstein
Sep 28:
Japan v Venezuela; South Korea v Uruguay; Turkmenistan v Palestine
Sep 29:
Russia v Iran; Mexico v Peru, Australia v Brazil
Sep 30:
United States v Chile; Lithuania v Andorra; Mauritius v Djibouti
Oct 1:
Panama v New Zealand
Oct 2:
South Korea v Colombia; China v Turkmenistan; Tajikistan v Palestine
Oct 3:
India v Brazil; Tunisia v Mali; Colombia v Paraguay; Canada v Peru; Sri Lanka v Djibouti
Oct 4:
United States v Mexico
Oct 5:
Liechtenstein v Gibraltar; Mauritius v Sri Lanka
Oct 6:
India v Uruguay; Mexico v Chile; South Korea v Uzbekistan; China v Tajikistan
Oct 7:
Colombia v Peru; United States v Canada

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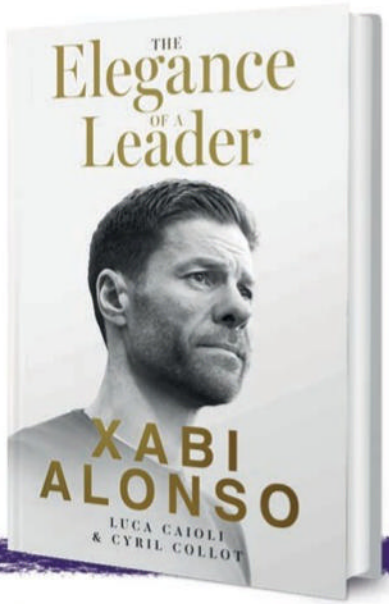

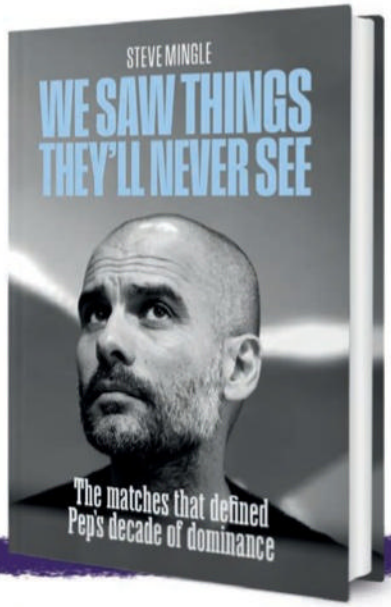

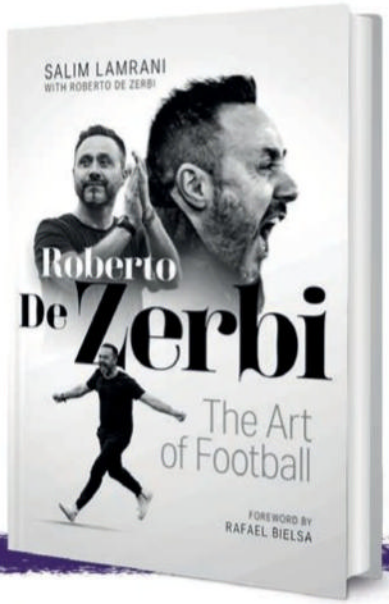

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